

Kazuki Amamiya

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START?

► Yes No

5

Haibara's Teenage

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Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Prologue: In the Shadow of the Light](#)

[Chapter 1: What Are Couples Supposed to Do?](#)

[Chapter 2: Consultation Center for Romance Newbies](#)

[Chapter 3: The Ball Game Competition](#)

[Chapter 4: The Finals](#)

[Final Chapter: To Know Foolishness](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)

Prologue: In the Shadow of the Light

I couldn't do a thing.

I had impulsively grabbed Natsuki by the collar, but when he apologized to me with that look on his face, I couldn't keep my fist clenched. He hadn't done anything wrong to begin with—I'd just gotten riled up on my own. I was the one who'd suppressed my own feelings, entrusted the problem to Natsuki without even asking how he felt, and then ended up feeling betrayed by his decision. But all he had done was be true to his heart, and as a result, he chose not Uta, but Hoshimiya. My anger was misdirected. And in the first place, none of this had anything to do with me.

I knew that. I understood it perfectly well. Logically speaking, that is. But I couldn't lie to myself. I felt murky inside, my emotions a jumbled mess too complicated to put into words. I couldn't even say anything decent while Uta cried.

All I could do was stay by her side, and I didn't even know if I was doing that for her sake. If anything, I'd acted entirely out of self-gratification. I just wanted to do whatever I could, no matter how trivial.

It was a shitty mistake to begin with. Who was I to entrust Natsuki with anything? I must've given him more baggage. And because of that, even if he *had* chosen Uta, he wouldn't have truly been happy.

And above all, somewhere in the depths of my heart, a part of me had *wanted* this to happen. I was the lowest of the low. I was disappointed in myself. That's why, at the very least, I wanted to become a better person.

At the school festival, when Natsuki sang on the stage surrounded by tons of spectators, he seemed like he was from a totally different world. Even if I looked away from that dazzling sight, I could still hear his voice.

Yeah, he's the coolest around. Obviously, all sorts of people would like him. How much effort did he put into writing this song? And... Could I do that too? If I

put in the effort, could I change a little?

I don't know. I don't know—but it's better than doing nothing. I don't want to be a hero who shines at the center of the crowd like Natsuki. I don't want to use a song to confess my feelings to the girl I love like the protagonist of a story or something.

If I could become someone who helps you when you're crying, even if it's nothing much...

Yeah, that's all I want.

Chapter 1: What Are Couples Supposed to Do?

Autumn was reaching its peak in November, and the wind had grown frigid. The advent of winter drew close.

Because a single long-sleeved shirt wasn't enough for this weather, I also had on a cardigan. But today was especially chilly, so perhaps I should've worn an additional layer. Picking out clothes in this season was a struggle, since the temperature might turn hot or cold without warning. It'd probably get a little warmer around noon.

"Natsuki-kun!"

Hearing someone call my name from behind, I turned around. An incredibly beautiful girl entered my line of sight. Hoshimiya Hikari, dressed in casual clothes, gave me a small wave as she walked over.

"Sorry for the wait. I wasn't sure what to wear," she apologized. Hikari wore a black blouse and a long beige skirt.

That outfit looks really good on her. She kinda has a mature vibe, which is different from usual. Oops, now isn't the time to ogle! I need to reply. "No worries. I just got here too," I said. In actuality, I'd been so excited that I had arrived at our meetup spot an hour ago, but I could keep that to myself.

"Really? That's good." Hikari massaged her chest in relief. Then her expression turned abashed and she whispered, "Y-Yesterday... I was so excited yesterday that I had a hard time falling asleep... And I ended up oversleeping."

I inadvertently chuckled at her grade school-level excuse, which caused her to pout.

"D-Don't laugh!"

"Sorry, sorry. It was funny," I said. *I didn't get much sleep either. But I'm too embarrassed to admit it, so my lips are sealed.* "Anyway, let's go inside." I offered my hand to Hikari.

She blinked at me before timidly grasping it with her own. *Nice! My plan to naturally hold hands from the get-go was a success! If I'd let my opportunity escape at the start of the date, I'd have felt like I missed my chance for the rest of the day. Hikari's hand's nice and warm...*

"Natsuki-kun, I knew it. You've been waiting for a long time, haven't you?" Hikari said.

"Wh-What makes you think that?" I asked with a start.

"Your hands are freezing," she stated matter-of-factly.

R-Right, they are... Good point! So Hikari's hand wasn't warmer than normal. Mine was just colder. "Sorry, I've actually been waiting for an hour," I admitted. "I was too eager."

"Why're you apologizing? I'm the one who should be sorry for making you wait so long."

"No, don't be! I heard that time spent waiting is also part of the date," I said. *Exactly right! Today's my momentous first date with my girlfriend, Hikari! I'm super nervous, but I want to have fun, and I want her to have fun too. Heck, I'm already having fun just because she's here with me.*

"It's pretty crowded," she said.

We entered the shopping mall with our hands intertwined. It wasn't crowded enough for us to get pushed around, but the place still bustled with people.

"It's Saturday, after all," I remarked.

Our innocuous itinerary for the day was to window-shop, have lunch, watch a movie, and then go home. Hikari and I had planned it out together yesterday. Since this was our first date as a couple, we didn't want to do anything too wild, and there just happened to be a movie that Hikari wanted to watch. Plus, I needed to start picking out winter clothes. Miori had chosen almost all my presentable clothes for me, but I didn't own any outfits appropriate for wintertime.

When I'd mentioned that, Hikari had said, "Then I'll pick them for you!" Honestly, I had zero confidence in my fashion sense, so her offer was a big help.

I'd wanted to ask Miori for her assistance again, but we'd already called off our partnership. I'd legitimately been too reliant on Miori, and now that our alliance was through, I realized this fact all the more.

I was over the moon that I was dating Hikari. But I'd never dated anyone before, so I was full of uncertainty, which automatically led to me wanting to consult Miori for advice. But the person who had always been there to lend me a hand was gone now. It felt like I was walking alone in darkness.

"Then our alliance is over. Our partnership is now dissolved."

I suddenly recalled how Miori had sounded during our phone call. *She was acting weird then. Did something bad happen on her end? That was the day she started dating Reita, so shouldn't she have been happy?*

"What's wrong, Natsuki-kun? You're zoning out." Hikari's face abruptly popped into the corner of my vision. Her expression was laden with concern.

I had sunk into the deep sea of my thoughts without realizing it. That was a bad habit of mine. *Worrying about Miori won't fix anything. Anyway, I'm gonna enjoy my date with Hikari today!* "Sorry, it's nothing. Uh, where should we go first?"

"Leave it to me! I have a few stores in mind with clothes that'll look great on you!" Hikari beat her chest proudly. Her breasts jiggled a little.

My gaze almost unwittingly fell to her bountiful chest, but I somehow managed to keep my eyes level. "Okay, that'd be great," I replied as though nothing had happened.

She seemed like she was about to break into a skip as she led me around. "Isn't holding hands in public kinda embarrassing?"

"Yeah," I said. "It feels like people are looking at us. I spotted some kids from our school too."

There were plenty of couples walking around holding hands, but if I wasn't being overly self-conscious, it felt like we were drawing an awful lot of attention. *Understandable. Hikari is just that cute!*

Two girls who were probably upperclassmen from our school saw us and let

out shrill squeals. *How am I supposed to react to that?* I wondered. Hikari was also unsettled, forcing herself to smile.

“If you dislike it, do you wanna let go?” I asked.

“I don’t dislike it. How could you say that? I’m gonna get mad!” she said sulkily, her cheeks puffing up.

Ugh. Too cute! To think such an adorable girl is my girlfriend. I still can’t believe it...

“I bet this’ll look good on you. Try it on!” She had picked out a navy blue Chesterfield coat.

At her urging, I put it on. It was very warm; the fabric was soft and cozy. I looked at myself in a nearby full-length mirror. *She’s right. This does look pretty good on me... I think? It slims my figure, and I look sharp... At least, that’s how it feels.*

Hikari looked at me and let out an enigmatic cry. “Ohhh!”

“What do you think?” I asked.

“It... It looks good! Really, really great!” she said, wearing an excessively wide grin while nodding her head vigorously.

“Your compliment feels kinda half-hearted.”

“N-No! I mean it! You look really cool!”

It feels like Hikari’s more frantic than usual today, or perhaps better put, she’s more flustered. She normally comes off calmer... Wait, is she nervous? I’ve never seen this side of her before, but there’s nothing to complain about, because she’s cute.

She giggled. “My boyfriend is so cool,” she blissfully murmured to herself.

Um, I can hear you, you know? Unsure what to do, I laughed wryly.

Hikari looked at me with a start. “D-Did you hear that?!”

“Nope, didn’t hear a thing. What, did you say something?”

“O-Oh, really? That’s good...”

“Mm-hmm. Thanks for the compliment.”

She stared at me blankly, and then her face flushed red right before my eyes. “You *did* hear!” She slapped my back.

I don't believe violence is the answer.

We continued bantering while Hikari chose a number of winter outfits for me. My wallet was in a poor state after buying my guitar, so I kept my purchases limited to a long-sleeved shirt and the Chesterfield coat I'd tried on. However, I wanted to buy the other clothes she'd recommended once I had cash to spare.

“We should eat lunch now,” I said.

“Good idea. What should we have?”

We walked around the mall's food court as we deliberated.

“Hmm... Honestly, I'm good with anything,” I said, but then a thought suddenly occurred to me. *I heard it's bad to say that you're good with anything during a date. Shouldn't the man take initiative here? It's not a great look if I leave all the choices to her. So maybe I ought to narrow down our options first? But it might be too late now...* In the end, I decided to leave it up to her and asked, “Hikari, what do you want to eat?” *I'm sorry for being indecisive...*

“Ummm...” She thought for a moment. “Oh, I know. How about hamburger steak?”

“Sounds good.” I nodded.

We entered a Western-style restaurant that offered hamburger steak. A server led us to our seats, and once we finished ordering our food, a period of silence followed. *Wh-What should I say?*

“Um, thanks for picking out clothes for me. It was really helpful,” I said.

“I-It wasn't much!” Hikari stammered. “Really, it was fun! I'll do it as often as you want! Besides, it's a feast for my eyes!”

Feast for your eyes? What does that mean? Simply too baffled, I missed my chance to ask her to elaborate.

“I... I can't wait for the movie!” she continued.

“Y-Yeah!”

She was being just as awkward as I was, her eyes darting around in their sockets. Silence fell upon us again. We’d been chatting just fine until now, but sitting face-to-face exacerbated the jitters. I kept sipping water to brush off the awkwardness and inevitably emptied my glass. But somehow, I managed to keep the conversation going until our food arrived.

“Cool, let’s dig in,” I said.

“It looks tasty. Bon appétit!” Eyes sparkling, Hikari began to stuff her cheeks with hamburger steak.

I, on the other hand, felt extremely relieved—because I didn’t need to talk while we were eating.

“Whew! I’m full. That was delicious,” Hikari eventually said.

“Yeah,” I responded, and then paused when I saw the time. “Ack! We need to get going!” Only ten minutes remained before the movie would start.

“You’re right! We took too long!”

There was no time for idle chatter after our meal. We hastily settled our bill and rushed to the movie theater. The two of us barely got to our seats before the movie started, but that meant we didn’t get to buy drinks. Popcorn or other snacks were unnecessary since we’d just eaten lunch, but I wanted a drink. Hikari didn’t say anything, but I suspected she was thinking the same. This had been a huge scheduling error.

I sighed quietly. *I feel like things aren’t going as planned. I didn’t do enough prior research, and I lack dating experience. I wish I’d done a better job taking the lead...*

The big screen was the only thing glowing in the dim theater. Though the movie hadn’t started yet, previews for other films were now rolling. I glanced at Hikari, and our eyes happened to meet. Flustered, she whipped her gaze back towards the screen. It was dark, but I could make out a red hue dusting her cheeks.

Was she looking at me? While I vacillated between whether I should ask or

not, the whispers surrounding us ceased. The theater went silent as the grave, and then the film began.

The movie Hikari had wanted to watch was about a girl who'd lost her family in an accident, and the love that girl's childhood friend had for her. She went on a journey in search of a place to die, and the boy accompanied her.

The film unfolded slowly and deliberately, with the characters' anguish conveyed only through the actors' expressions. It was the kind of tale that quietly stirred my heart.

I glanced to the side once more. Hikari sat straight up, her gaze glued to the screen. She looked deeply moved, and tears welled up in the corner of her eye.

Unlike her, I couldn't focus on the movie. The male lead aspired to become a doctor, and he seemed overly perfect—he felt far too removed from someone like me. I couldn't empathize with a person who succeeded in everything from the very beginning. Consequently, though my eyes watched the movie play out, my mind wandered.

Is this okay? The question popped into my mind again. *Is this date the right move for a couple? I don't know. This is my second chance at life, but I can't change the fact that I'm still a virgin. I could've done better. Planning out the date, chatting... Today was full of screwups. Hikari took the lead when we were window-shopping too.*

All I've done is rely on her. I'm pathetic! Come to think of it, this plan was pretty much an exact copy of our double date with Reita and Miori. Should I have come up with something more romantic? Was that what I should've done? I don't know. It's our first date, so I do think it's good to play it safe. In the first place, what even is a typical date?

What exactly are couples supposed to do?

My mind spun round and round over a question I had no answer for.

It had only been three days since I'd started dating Hikari, and it felt like I was going through a series of unprecedented experiences. I wasn't a person who could just do things well from the outset, so I was constantly plagued with unease.

I want to be with Hikari. I want to make her happy. I really do, but that all means nothing if it stays a mere feeling. Isn't there anyone who could teach me about romance? While I brooded over such things, the movie plunged into its finale, and the tempestuous plot twist sucked me in. *I want to become like this cool protagonist.*

"That was really good! I bawled my eyes out," Hikari said with gusto as she wiped the corners of her eyes with a handkerchief.

"I didn't expect a happy ending after all that," I said.

"Right? I thought for sure there was no path to salvation."

That was a good movie! As a happy ending supremacist, I'm extremely satisfied.

We left the shopping mall and walked to the station. It wasn't even 6 p.m. yet, but the sky was already dyed scarlet. The days were gradually shortening.

Suddenly, our hands brushed against one another's, and then Hikari's fingers grabbed mine. Sensing her intention, I clasped her hand. It was a little chilly outside, so she felt very warm.

After a beat, I asked, "Did you have fun today?"

She nodded, wearing a big smile. "Of course I did! What about you?"

"Yeah, just being with you makes me happy," I told her sincerely.

Her cheeks flushed red.

Sh-Shit...! That just slipped out. I've been distracted, so I just... Extremely embarrassed, I felt my cheeks heat up, and I couldn't bring myself to look at Hikari's face. A dull thump struck my arm. *She's got a tendency to resort to violence. I know it's to hide her embarrassment, though.*

"That goes for me too," she whispered into my ear, catching me off guard. "Dummy."

Her soft, sweet voice has too much destructive power! Is she trying to kill me? Hikari's been relatively sharp-tongued recently. She's probably showing me her

true self. It makes me happy that she doesn't hold back around me, but sometimes she's too honest, which is bad for my heart... Just like now.

Everyone around us could see that we were both bright red. I didn't need to look to know. When an elderly couple passed by, they smiled warmly at us and murmured, "Oh my!"

We're acting like a pair of stupid lovebirds! I hate couples who flirt in public, yet here I am doing exactly that! I want us to be calm and intimate like that elderly couple.

"S-Say, Natsuki-kun... I was acting weird today, wasn't I?"

"N-No... I don't think you were. You were c-cute as always," I fumbled out. *Hey! Don't stutter there! I sound like a creep! Huh, I am a creep, you say? Right.*

"I... I was nervous... Extremely... I hid it, though..."

Uh, you weren't hiding it at all, but if I point that out, you'll probably get upset. I guess I'm in no position to do so either... My heart is racing even now, and I can't stop thinking about how we're holding hands.

"I feel the same," I admitted. That was the only reply I could muster. We were each other's first boyfriend and girlfriend. We were both trying to figure out how to behave.

I'm probably supposed to take the lead during moments like this since I'm the guy...but it's taking all I've got to figure out what's normal behavior. I'm so pathetic it makes me want to sigh. I want to be invincible.

We both fell silent.

Huh? Our conversation died... What do I do? C'mon, don't I have anything to talk about? We continued walking as I tried to figure out what to say. All the while, our hands stayed intertwined.

The next thing I knew, we'd reached the station's ticket gate. Hikari and I took different trains home, so we would part ways here. At least, we should've. She came to a stop and didn't let go of my hand.

"Hikari?" I questioned.

"Just... Just a little longer," she said.

I cocked my head to the side, unsure what she meant by that.

Seconds passed, and then she finally nodded. "Okay. Charging completed."

"Charging?"

"If I don't store up enough Natsuki-kun energy, I'll get lonely," she said, giggling shyly. She was too adorable.



Is this ultracute girl really my girlfriend? Everything she does throws me into a tizzy! It's bad for my heart.

"Okay then, see you later," she said.

"Y-Yeah," I replied. "See you at school."

Hikari waved goodbye as she left. The instant I was alone, a wave of exhaustion washed over me. Of course I would be tired; my heart had been pounding like crazy all day long. But it was a pleasant kind of fatigue—I'd undoubtedly enjoyed myself.

How long, if ever, would it take for our relationship to become like that elderly couple's? At least with the way things were right now, reaching that point was unimaginable for me.

A gloomy Monday followed my fun weekend date with Hikari. This was my second round of high school life that I'd longed for, but Monday blues were always the same. *Classes weren't on the list of things I wanted a do-over for... Sitting through them is a pain in the butt. Plus, there's another factor that's got me down.*

"Look, it's Haibara-kun."

"Wow, it really is. He's carrying his guitar too!"

As I made my way through the hallway that morning, I could hear girls from nearby classes whispering quietly. A week had passed since our band's concert at the school festival. I was ecstatic that it'd been such a big hit, but frankly, getting stared at in the halls was uncomfortable. It was easy for me to misconstrue the quiet murmuring as backbiting.

Still, compared to the attention I'd attracted the day after the festival, things had settled down a lot. Our performance had been a bit *too* successful. I wished for a rainbow-colored youth, but now I'd experienced a new side of popularity: standing out excessively was tiring.

I opened my classroom door and entered. Around half of my classmates had already arrived. When I headed to my seat, the usual group was already

gathered there.

Nanase was the first to spot me. “Haibara-kun, good morning,” she said, notifying Reita and Hikari of my presence.

“Hey,” Reita said, his tone the same as usual.

“Oh! Natsuki-kun! Morning!” Hikari’s expression blatantly lit up when she saw me, which was super cute.

“Morning, guys,” I said back.

Tatsuya got a yawn out before greeting me. “Yo.”

“You look sleepy,” I remarked.

“I never get enough shut-eye when we’ve got morning practice.”

“What time did you wake up?”

“Six. It’s uber rough man, for real. I used to make up for it during class,” Tatsuya grumbled.

“That’s right! You’ve really been paying close attention to the lessons lately,” Hikari said, impressed.

Nanase promptly followed up with a sharp quip. “Indeed. At the very least, he’s paying more attention than *you* are, Hikari.”

“It’d be a drag if I flunked. Y’know, remedial lessons and whatever,” he said.

“Tatsuya, I’m starting to see you in a better light. Are you growing up?” Reita asked.

“Shut up...” he replied.

Our conversation was exceedingly normal, but there was something awkward about it. The atmosphere in our group felt strained. And most likely, everyone else sensed it too.

But no one brought it up.

We all knew the cause, but it wasn’t a problem that could be resolved instantly. However, all of us did want to mend the group’s relationship, and that’s why we’d assembled here.

“Hey, did you see the *Puzzle & Tigers* update?” Tatsuya asked.

“Yeah. I’m tempted to whale a bit...” Reita replied.

While those two talked about a mobile game, Nanase tapped me on the shoulder. “Listen, Hikari keeps going on and on about the movie she watched over the weekend.”

“Because it was really good!” Hikari exclaimed. “Natsuki-kun, you agree with me, right?!”

“Yeah, it was a good movie,” I said.

“If you think so, then perhaps I’ll watch it,” Nanase said.

“Wait, do you not trust my opinion?” Hikari asked.

Before I knew it, I was dragged into their banter. Our friend group of six was a mix of boys and girls, so it wasn’t unusual for the conversations to splinter off. Yet there was one thing about this that weighed on my mind.

“I thought that if you were the one to make her happy, then...”

After the school festival incident, I’d been talking to Tatsuya less and less. We conversed when we were in a group setting like just now, but we didn’t chat one-on-one anymore. It even felt like he was avoiding being alone with me.

Back then, our exchange had felt like an argument. And I’d been the cause of it. Because when I was through with all my hesitation, the choice I’d made was reprehensible to Tatsuya. I had braced myself for the possibility that our friendship might never go back to the way it was.

That said, I didn’t know what to do about our current situation. What kind of feelings did Tatsuya harbor towards me? He didn’t show his emotions, so I didn’t know what was the correct way to treat him. I was lost.

“Come to think of it, where’s Uta?” Reita suddenly asked.

“She’s late. Did she run into trouble?” Hikari looked at the clock, her head tilted to the side.

It was almost time for morning assembly to begin. Pretty much all of our other classmates were here. Plus, Uta had basketball practice in the morning, so

she would normally be in the classroom earlier.

“Oh man, that was close! Made it!” Right as we started talking about her, Uta barreled into the room. She dropped her stuff off at her seat and then joined us. “Morning! Hey, guys!”

“Good morning, Uta-chan. You’re later than usual today,” Hikari said, discreetly raising the query that was on all of our minds.

Uta sheepishly scratched her cheek. “I wanted to practice until the very last minute, but I lost track of time... And then I ended up *literally* staying until the very last minute.” On a closer look, I noticed her forehead was covered in sweat.

“You’re certainly working hard,” Nanase said.

“Of course I am! I want to be a starter!”

Recently, Uta had been absorbed in basketball practice. After the third-years had retired over the summer, the basketball club was now in the process of forming a new team. They didn’t have a fixed starting lineup yet, so even a first-year like Uta stood a chance of making it. She’d been zealously practicing on her own late into the night too.

“We barely have any time after morning practice,” Tatsuya said in an exasperated tone.

“I... I know! I’ll be more careful next time.” Uta pouted.

“Well, it’s fine since you made it to class on time,” Reita said, intervening.

Right then, the morning assembly bell chimed. Everyone returned to their seats, and after a short wait, our homeroom teacher came in. When announcements began, I felt like all of the information that came out of the teacher’s mouth went in one ear and straight out the other.

I glanced over to where Uta sat. She was staring absentmindedly at the front of the classroom, her chin resting on her hand. I hadn’t spoken to her much either since *that* incident. We would talk to each other a bit whenever we were with the others, but never when we were alone. Seeing that I was the cause of our strained friendship, I had no right to say it made me lonely.

I'd followed my heart and made my choice. I believed that was the sincerest thing to do, and I didn't regret it. And that was precisely why I could do nothing more for the girl I hadn't chosen.

After school, I watched those who had club activities leave before I dropped by the second music room. I opened the door, revealing Serika, who was already playing her guitar. The intro of "Black Witch," a song we'd performed at the school festival concert, filled the room.

She stopped strumming and cocked her head to the side. "It's been a while, I think?"

"About a week, yeah," I said.

Our band had split up after our concert. The last time I'd been in the second music room was our final practice session. Serika and Mei were in different classes, and Iwano-senpai was in a different grade, so I didn't have many opportunities to see them. We'd talked about eventually throwing a wrap-up party but didn't have anything concrete planned. Then, Serika had summoned us all here.

"Oh, long time no see," said a voice from right behind me.

When did he sneak up on me? I whipped around to see Mei give me a small bow. "Dude, that almost gave me a heart attack!" I told him. "Can't you show up normally?"

"S-Sorry... I *was* trying to show up normally, though." He laughed awkwardly. His presence was weak, as always.

Anyway, that's three of us here. "Is Iwano-senpai coming too?"

"No, he's already in full-blown study mode," Serika replied.

I'd expect nothing less from him. There aren't a lot of people who'll start studying for college entrance exams in their second year. He's not the type of guy to be influenced by his peers, though. If anything, I bet he's the one doing the influencing.

"But he'll come to the wrap-up party, right?" I asked.

“I’ll ask him if he’s got a free weekend. Where should we go?”

“How about Icho or something?” I named a restaurant chain that only existed in northern Kanto (a fact that had been shocking to learn). Then it hit me—the four of us would never perform together again. Though I’d known this from the start, the realization still saddened me. Mishmash Leftovers, the band the four of us had formed, was now gone for good.

“What should we do going forward?” Serika murmured. That was likely what she’d gathered us here for. Even without Iwano-senpai, the three of us could still play together. “I’d decided our time limit was the end of the school festival, so I didn’t think about what happened after.”

“Serika, you’re going to keep playing music, right?” I asked.

“Obviously. I’m not gonna stop; I’ll keep playing forever.”

Of course she would. I hadn’t needed to ask that; it was a fact of life that Serika would continue making music for the rest of her days. Mei and I were the ones whose motivation was being called into question here.

Mei spoke up before me. “I want to play more. Even if it’s in a new band without senpai.” His expression hid calm determination. “Being in a band was strenuous and tiring, but it was fun.”

Serika nodded at him, and then her gaze turned to me. “What about you, Natsuki?”

“Well, I...”

Now that the concert was over, we didn’t have practice anymore, and I had time to spare. I’d gone on a date with Hikari, worked out, read books, and enjoyed the weekend to my heart’s content for the first time in a while. In all honesty, I felt satisfied. The concert we’d put on at the festival was akin to a miracle, and I didn’t feel like I could reproduce it ever again. If we couldn’t play with all four of us, then perhaps it would be better to stop.

But now that I was here, I realized what I truly wanted.

“I want to continue, I think.”

Practice was grueling, but my days were fulfilling. Not gonna lie: it wore me

out, it was awful how terrible I was, and sometimes it was straight-up painful. But during that time, I also learned how enjoyable and interesting making music could be... I think those vibrant days were part of the youth I wished for. And that's why, if possible, I want to keep playing in a band. I'm nervous that it'll be different from before, but if Serika and Mei are with me, then it'll work out.

"If it's you, Natsuki, you'll do great. You're a man that I trust, after all." Serika grinned, showing me her pearly whites, and patted me on the back.

"Since we're starting up again, should we recruit a new member first?" Mei asked.

If we wanted to play as a whole band, we'd need to find a drummer to replace Iwano-senpai. But it wouldn't be that easy. We wanted someone who had both the drive to keep up with all of our practice sessions and outstanding skills besides. Not that I was one to talk.

"They need to be someone I click with. I don't want to compromise," Serika said bluntly. Her assertion was no surprise, since she'd purposefully chosen me and Iwano-senpai due to that same reasoning.

"Did you click with me?" Mei asked.

"Not really at first. But once we played together, we did."

I sensed that she was about to say, "Well, I didn't even know you existed in the beginning," but I quickly covered her mouth. *Stop hurting poor Mei's little heart with your mischief! I know you're not being malicious about it, but still!*

"Okay, anyway, we need to find someone first," she said.

"Before that, can I say something?" I interjected. I was hesitant, but there was something that needed to be said before we launched a search.

It was a miracle that the four of us had formed a band. Serika's charisma was part of the reason, but it was a huge coincidence that there had just happened to be a bassist and a drummer left over in the light music club.

Plus, unlike our previous arrangement, our new band wouldn't have a time limit. Not to mention the fact that we didn't have a goal—at the very least, we had nothing specific to shoot for. Before, we had clearly defined giving the best

concert at the school festival as our time limit and objective. That's why all four of us had been able to maintain a high level of motivation.

We wouldn't have all that this time, so we were left with a mountain of questions to answer. What should we strive for? How often should we practice and for how long? How should we prioritize the band in relation to our studies and part-time jobs?

If there was a difference in our intentions, then a rift would surely form in our band. Thus, on top of searching for a new member, we needed to decide these things.

After I finished my explanation, Mei and Serika nodded in agreement.

"Fair points," she said.

"Yes... It's not like I'm aiming to become a professional musician," Mei added.

Realistically speaking, we had school and our part-time jobs to think about. I could no longer prioritize our band above everything the way I had for the school festival either.

"Right, that's how it is for you two," Serika murmured. Her previously bright smile was replaced with a serious expression.

Loneliness tinged her eyes, but I couldn't lie to her. This was reality. My objective was to live a rainbow-colored youth. Music was a means to obtain that, not the end goal. And just like Mei had said, I wasn't trying to go pro either.

Serika was different, though. With her talent, she wasn't one to settle down in a high school band like ours. That's why it was in everyone's best interest to establish any differences in intention now.

"What *do* I want to do? I'll give it some thought," Serika murmured as she stared out the window. Perhaps she understood what I was trying to convey.

What even is a "rainbow-colored youth"? It was a question that I constantly pondered. I'd told Serika that we should have a clearly defined goal, but here I was, unsure of what I was striving for. What a joke.

The school festival concert and the conversation I'd had with Hikari right after—surely both were part of the rainbow-colored youth I sought. But now, for some reason, I felt like I was straying from my goal, even though I'd successfully begun dating Hikari, the girl I loved.

Was it because I had tangible problems that weren't a part of my idealized youth? Could that have been why? The tension in my friend group, the question of the band—there were no easy solutions for either. And maybe they weren't even problems at all. These sorts of worries were a dime a dozen in life.

I was searching for something abstract, searching for something I pictured in the depths of my heart. I wanted to become friends with the people I admired. I wanted to date the girl I'd fallen in love with. I longed for something I could obsess over. And I wished to live every day to the fullest.

If that was all I desired, then I'd already achieved my goals. It was inevitable that a few problems would arise in the process. So what the heck was I missing? To begin with, what had made me want a rainbow-colored youth in the first place? Before my empty, gray-colored youth, before all my regrets... What had driven me to go through a high school glow-up the first time?

What I'd been wanting was...

"Hey! Come on, Natsuki! Lets race to the top of that mountain!"

Suddenly, I recalled a childhood memory. Miori, whose hair was short and boyish, dashed past me, her back steadily receding into the distance. *"Wait,"* I said, desperately trying to keep up...

"Hey, Haibara, wake up! Answer this problem."

The teacher's voice, plus a painful sensation on my cheek, returned me to reality at last. I opened my eyes and raised my head. Murakami-sensei, our math teacher, glared at me from the podium. To add to that, the entire class was watching me. I looked to my side; evidently, Hikari had been poking my cheek with her finger. She glared at me with cold, reproachful eyes for some reason.

"I see you're finally awake." Murakami-sensei let out an exasperated sigh.

"Ummm... Good morning," I said.

“Am I a joke to you? Hurry up and solve this problem.”

Apparently, it was my turn to answer a problem in class. There were a number of math questions written on the blackboard; Okajima-kun, who sat in front of me, and Fujiwara, who sat in front of him, were standing before the board with chalk in hand. *I guess the last problem's for me.*

I bowed to Murakami-sensei as I wrote the answer on the board. It must've been a fairly difficult problem for a first-year, because the class oohed when I finished.

“Good grief,” Murakami-sensei grumbled in a fed up tone. “Correct—even though you don't pay attention in class.”

Sorry, but this is my second time in high school... I'd considered pretending like I didn't know how to solve it, but decided against it. He likely would've been even angrier, since he'd caught me snoozing. I apologized to Murakami-sensei and returned to my seat. When I sat down, Hikari appeared to be in a terrible mood. She glanced at me coldly and then turned away.

“Did... Did I do something wrong?” I whispered.

“What were you dreaming about?” she asked quietly.

My dream? What was it about, again? I was definitely dreaming about something, although I can't remember what. But what does that have to do with this?

I hesitated. “Are you angry with me?”

“No, not really.”

Th-There it is! Girls always say they're not angry even when they are! What the heck did I do? I'm too thickheaded to even guess... That aside, Hikari is really cute when she puffs up her cheeks to show that she's upset. I meekly listened to our lesson, unsure of what to say.

Suddenly, Hikari whispered, “You were sleep talking and said Miori-chan's name.”

O-Oh... I see, so that's what happened. Come to think of it, that does sound like what I was dreaming about... I guess I said Miori's name while reliving old

memories, and Hikari must've heard me. She's my girlfriend; it wouldn't feel good to hear me mumble another girl's name in my sleep.

"Um," I began. "Erm, I'm sorry."

"Don't be. You have no reason to apologize, right?" she replied aloofly. She was correct, but I couldn't do anything except say sorry.

What should I do? I have absolutely no idea.

Her mouth suddenly slackened. "I'm kidding. I'm really not upset." She rested her chin on her hands and looked at me, snickering with glee.

These pranks are bad for my heart—will you please quit it? Though, I guess I was at fault here.

"But I'm still curious. What kind of dream was it?" she asked.

"I was dreaming about when I was a kid. I used to play with Miori and some other kids."

Back then, we'd been part of a group of four friends. Miori's whims would dictate what we did when we hung out. I'd always call out her name as I chased after her. The dream had played out as a clip from our childhood routine, one that was an extremely distant memory.

"Makes sense. The two of you are childhood friends, after all." Hikari nodded in understanding. "Stories of when you were young, huh? I want to hear more details later."

"They're not very interesting," I warned.

"Still, I want to know. You don't talk much about yourself." Her observation caught me off guard.

I didn't divulge information about myself because I didn't like my old self. Plus, seeing that I couldn't tell people that I'd traveled back in time, there weren't many things I could say. But I was happy that my girlfriend was curious about me. And I also wanted to know more about the girl named Hoshimiya Hikari.

While we whispered to each other, I felt Murakami-sensei's glare land on us. I hastily leaned away from Hikari and turned my attention onto my textbook. *I'm*

sorry I'm an irresponsible student who's only got good grades going for him...

After school, I grabbed my bag and left the classroom. I had a shift at Café Mares today, so I wasn't meeting with the band. Plus, because Serika was still mulling over the future, the plan was for us to practice on our own for the time being.

"Brrr, it's cold," I said.

It was especially chilly out due to the rain. *Maybe it's time to bring out the big coats.* I stepped out of the school's front entrance and opened my umbrella. I'd wanted to walk to the station with Hikari since I didn't have club activities, but she had literature club today. *Sad... Lining up our schedules is pretty hard.*

"Um, Haibara-kun."

Someone called out to me from behind, and I glanced over my shoulder. Standing there was a girl from the class next door to mine. *If I remember correctly, she's...Miwa-san?* She chatted me up every once in a while, so I remembered her name. She had a calm demeanor and was pleasant to talk to.

"Hey, Miwa-san. What's up?"

"Erm..." She hesitated. "Haibara-kun, are you going home now too?"

"Yeah. I've got work today."

"I... I see. You work near the station, right?" she asked timidly.

I nodded. "Yep. At Café Mares. It's got a great ambience, and the coffee is delicious too, so I highly recommend it." *Man, when did I start speaking so smoothly? I deserve a pat on the back! Communication really is all about experience. I've had more opportunities to practice after the concert, with all the people talking to me.*

"If... If it's okay with you, could we walk together until then?"

Miwa-san wasn't a stranger, but I wouldn't have gone as far as to say we were friends. If I wasn't just being overly self-conscious, then I had an idea why she was talking to me. And that made it difficult to answer her. Why? Because I had a girlfriend.

It's gotta be a bad idea to walk home with another girl. Nanase works at the same place as me, so she's a different story, but Miwa-san doesn't fall into that category.

Sensing my hesitation, Miwa-san looked like she was about to burst into tears. "Um, is it true you're dating Hoshimiya-san?"

I didn't want her to make such an expression. If I could, I wanted to be kind to the people who fell for someone like me. But priorities are priorities. There was nothing for it. All I could do was give her a nod.

"I see," she said after a beat. "Sorry. I didn't mean to put you in a tight spot."

"Nah, you didn't."

"To be honest, I knew. The rumors have already reached my class, and the title of the song you sang at the concert made it obvious... But I couldn't give up until I heard it from you directly." Teardrops spilled out of Miwa-san's eyes. She looked just like Uta had on that day. "You've probably figured it out by now...but I liked you. I liked you, Haibara-kun."

"Thank you. I'm happy to hear that." Those were the only words I could offer her, and she knew that.

Miwa-san vigorously rubbed the tears away with her sleeve and smiled at me, her eyes puffy. "Goodbye." She ran out into the rain. She'd been holding a foldable umbrella, but she flew off without bothering to open it.

I was worried she'd catch a cold, but I had no right to stop her. A sigh inadvertently slipped out of my mouth. I was delighted to be the target of someone's affection, but it felt heavy at the same time.

I wanted to be popular, but now I feel like I'm only bringing sorrow to others. In that regard, it's a good thing that Hikari and I are dating now. News that we're a couple will keep spreading. Once people know I'm taken, they'll stop seeing me as a potential love interest.

This is fine. The only person's affection I can return is Hikari's, after all.

I opened my umbrella and stepped out into the rain. *I'm on the clock until 9 p.m. tonight with Kirishima-san. A lot of regulars will come by, so I'd better work*

hard.

I stopped mindlessly cooking and took a breather.

As the store settled down, Kirishima-san called out to me. "Hey! I heard you finally got yourself a girlfriend. Good for you!"

"Thanks..." I said. "Wait, who told you?"

"Hmm? Heard it from Shinohara-kun and Yuino-chan."

Oh right. The three of them worked the same shift yesterday... Those blabbermouths! Kirishima-san is going to be a pain to deal with now that the cat's out of the bag. She always turns everything into a big deal.

She brought her mouth close to my ear, smirking widely. "Sooo, how's it going? Did you do it already?"

"Quit it with the dirty questions. Can't you behave like a lady?" I replied. *Really? That's what you wanted to ask?*

"My, oh my. I think you need to stop putting girls on a pedestal."

Just let me dream! I'm a virgin, for god's sake! Though I shouted at her internally, if I let too much information about myself slip, Kirishima-san would become even more annoying, so I stubbornly kept my cool. "We haven't done anything yet. We're a wholesome couple."

"Reeeally? Tell me again, how long have you two been dating?"

"It's only been a week."

"Wow! So you're in the passionate honeymoon phase! How nice!" Kirishima-san gazed into the distance with a reminiscent expression. "I went through that too."

With her looks and personality, I'm sure she's got tons of experience in romance. Isn't she dating someone right now too?

"Hey, show me a pic of her! Bring one out!"

I yielded to her persistent pestering and showed her a picture of Hikari and me. It was the photo we'd taken around the beginning of the school year. *Come*

to think of it, we haven't taken a pic since we started dating.

“Whoa! She’s super cute! Holy crap, she’s adorable!” Kirishima-san squealed loudly in excitement.

Understandable reaction. She is extremely cute. And she’s my girlfriend. Heh heh heh...

Right then, the door to the back room opened with an audible creak. The manager peeked out of the break room, smiled broadly, and then closed the door again.

Uh... Can you at least say something? That was terrifying. Kirishima-san seemed to think the same, because she wordlessly began to clean the shop, her face white as a sheet. After we cleaned in silence for a while, she quietly shimmied up to my side.

“So... Have you kissed?”

Um, do you ever learn? Seriously, this girl...

“Oh, so you did,” she teased as soon as she sensed the tiniest hint that I’d wavered. “How nice! You seem happy.”

“Kirishima-san, don’t you have a boyfriend?”

I’d asked that merely to reverse the situation, but she groaned instead. “I got dumped two days ago.”

That’s...super recent, indeed. The air around her suddenly began to turn gloomy. *Wh-What am I supposed to say here?*

“I-It’s fine, really. No need to worry about me. Mm-hmm. I had a feeling he was taking advantage of me from the beginning... I don’t really care that we broke up... Haaah...”

I don’t think you’d be tearing up if you didn’t care. But I’ll keep my mouth shut.

“I need to find a new love, just like you did, Natsuki-chan.” Kirishima-san rested her chin against the window frame with a distant look in her eyes.

“Anyhoo, is she your first girlfriend?”

I nodded.

She looked at me enviously. “I hope it lasts. My first boyfriend evaporated just like that after two weeks.”

“I appreciate the support, but can you quit making statements that are so hard to respond to?” I retorted. Kirishima-san had an excessive number of self-deprecating jokes up her sleeve. She seemed to have far more life experience than I did, and I was the one who had leaped through time.

“I know! Now that you’ve got your first girlfriend, your big sis here will give you some tips on romance.”

“I’d genuinely appreciate that,” I said with some pause. “I don’t know anything about romance.”

“Riiight?! So you can count on me!”

“Kirishima-san, do you have much experience with it?”

“Sure do! I always date assuming we’ll get married, and my current boyfriend’s my fourth... Sorry, he’s not my current boyfriend anymore... Huh? Can I even help? Wait, was I dumped four times? What... What even are romance tips?” Kirishima-san mumbled to herself with her head hanging down.

“You’re the one who suggested it, so please don’t spiral into the darkness,” I said, shaking her shoulders.

She returned to life and managed to utter, “Sorry, Natsuki-chan... I might not be very helpful.”

“I’ve got zero experience with romance, so any input will help plenty.”

“You mean it? Okay then! Ask me anything. Like, is there something you’re worried about with your relationship?”

“Well... How do I put this? It’s something that’s been bothering me, but...” I hesitated. My concerns were probably much more basic than what Kirishima-san was expecting. Eventually, I managed to wring out my question. “What are couples supposed to do?”

Her eyes widened in surprise. “Uh, what?”

Yeah, I expected that reaction, but I’m being sincere here!

“What do couples do? You mean like on normal dates? You’re not asking me about flirting, right?” she asked.

“Yeah, dates. What did you do?”

“Hmm. I like shopping, so I dragged my boyfriends along with me a lot. We also watched movies, went to amusement parks, aquariums, that kinda stuff. It was fun to go karaoke or sightsee together too.”

“I see...”

“Relaxing at home together is also a good time. Y’know, like a house date? You can flirt to your heart’s content at home too. Like, it doesn’t really matter where you are—wouldn’t you have fun as long as you’re together?” Kirishima-san pointed out. “Isn’t that why you started dating?”

That’s true. I’m satisfied just being with Hikari.

“Or what? Don’t know where to invite her out to? Is that what’s up?”

“Kinda... I guess that’s where I am. We went to watch a movie the other day, but I’m not sure what to do next. What kinda thing would make us more like a couple? I’m not really sure.”

Kirishima-san hummed, earnestly ruminating over my question. “Natsuki-chan, if you’ve got nowhere you wanna go, then why not ask her? I don’t know what kind of girl she is, but I’d bet she’s got a bunch of places she wants to go with her boyfriend,” she said, her tone awfully gentle. The way she delivered her advice made her seem more mature than usual. “Plus, you don’t need to worry about seeming like a couple. The relationship is between you and her; what’s important is that the two of you are comfortable. Who cares what other people think, yeah?”

This is the first time it’s actually felt like Kirishima-san’s older than me... Wait, in reality, I’m the older one, though I’m more like a grade-schooler when it comes to romance. “You’re right,” I said. “Thank you.”

Her advice gently seeped into my chest. *Worrying about this on my own won’t help. I should talk to Hikari, and we can decide together. I’ve got no experience in romance, so nothing will come from forcing myself to show off.*

Kirishima-san laughed. "Was that really useful? Oh boy, we talked about something serious for once." She smiled bashfully, and her cheeks turned a bit pink from embarrassment.

"Can I get the bill?" a regular customer called out.

"Oops, yes! Please wait just a moment!" she replied and briskly walked over to the register.

A question suddenly hit me as I watched her go. *Why has Kirishima-san been dumped four times when she's good-looking and has a great personality?* Then, what she'd told me just moments ago flashed into my head.

"Yes, I am! I always date assuming we'll marry, and my current boyfriend's my fourth... Sorry, he's not my current boyfriend anymore... Huh? Can I even help? Wait, was I dumped four times? What... What even are romance tips?"

Oh... Maybe it's because she's too serious... I'm wholly convinced that's why, but you know what they say: let sleeping dogs lie. All I can do is pray that her next love turns out to be a good one.

I headed home from work; it was about a five-minute walk to the station from the café. The first half of my shift had been hectic today, but all I did during the latter half was chat. *Kirishima-san's mood fluctuated like crazy, which wore me out, but I also gained a lot from our conversation. People with life experience really are a world apart. Who, me? The only thing I've accumulated is years of idling away...*

"Huh?" When I entered the station, right as I passed through the ticket gate, I spotted a familiar figure's back.

"Hey, isn't this cute? It's trending right now!"

Her black hair was tied into a ponytail, and she wore the same uniform as me. Her slim body supported both a backpack and an enamel sports bag slung over her shoulder. She looked like a high school girl on her way home after practice.

"It's cute. It looks good on you, Miori." Walking next to her was a slender high school boy with a pleasant mien.

They were Motomiya Miori and Shiratori Reita. For a split second, I'd almost wanted to call out to them, but I didn't since it would've been insensitive of me to disrupt their alone time. She playfully poked Reita's side every now and then, jovially chatting with him.

Man, they go home together after practice. 'Course they do. They're dating, after all. I guess it didn't feel real until I saw them together firsthand.

"Then our alliance is over. Our partnership is now dissolved."

I suddenly recalled the conversation I'd had with Miori the night after the school festival's second day. *She sounded sorta unstable back then, but I guess it was just my imagination. At least, I don't see any signs of distress in her smile now that she's talking to Reita.*

"I'm worrying too much," I murmured.

I was shocked that our partnership ended just like that, but Miori was only stating the obvious. It's pointless to draw out something unnecessarily. That's all she meant.

I stopped at a vending machine and bought a black coffee. If I bumped into them here, Miori and I would end up taking the same train while Reita went home alone. It would put me in a tricky position, so I killed some time instead.

I was dating now, and so were my friends; that meant there were more things to pay attention to. Setting aside whether that was good or bad, it was only natural that people's relationships would change as time passed.

I took a sip of canned coffee. As always, it didn't taste very good.

The next day, homeroom was livelier than normal. The reason? Because we had a new event coming up.

"Our school's ball game competition has been scheduled for Wednesday next week. Starting today until then, gym classes will be dedicated to practicing for each event. Work hard and go for gold," our teacher said.

"Hell yeah!" Okajima-kun of the soccer club cheered.

The ball game competition? Oh yeah, our school holds that around now.

Beside me, Hikari whispered, “What’re the events?”

“I think there’s basketball, soccer, volleyball, dodgeball, and table tennis,” I replied, listing them as the memories came back to me.

Dodgeball was the only mixed-gender event; guys and girls played separately in the others. One person could only participate in two events max. Due to class size limitations, if the boys chose to play soccer, the girls would play basketball, and vice versa.

“Natsuki-kun, you sure know a lot about this,” Hikari remarked.

Anyone would be well versed in the format if they did it three years in a row.

“Hmm... Maybe I’ll choose table tennis. Otherwise, I’ll end up dragging everyone down,” she said, worry filling her voice.

Come to think of it, she said table tennis was her best sport when we went to the Spor-Cha. Considering how abysmal her athletic abilities are, her only choice is to play what she’s best at—table tennis. “Yeah, that sounds good,” I said.

“What are you going to choose? Basketball?”

“Well, I’ve got the most confidence in it, so...”

For sports like basketball and soccer, only one person who played on the school’s team would be allowed to participate in that event. Honestly, it’d feel like cheating if I played the basketball event, since I’d technically been part of the team during my first round of high school. But people who’d been part of their team in junior high could play, so maybe it didn’t matter that much.

“I want to see you play basketball again,” Hikari said.

“All right,” I said coolly. *Okay! Basketball it is! Who cares about the rules? I’m gonna live up to Hikari’s expectations! Besides, in my pursuit of a rainbow-colored youth, I’ve gotta tackle this event with all I’ve got! If we want to seize victory, then it’s definitely best if I play basketball.*

“During the ball game competition, we’ll get points depending on how well we place in each event. All classes will be ranked based on their overall points. If we win, I’ll get to brag about it during faculty drinking parties, so do your best for me!” our homeroom teacher added unnecessarily.

“Whaaat?” groaned everyone in the classroom.

“Right, we’ll be competing against the other classes. I’ll give it my best shot.” Hikari balled her hands into fists and let out an enthusiastic little grunt. She was cute when she pumped herself up.

During my first stint in high school, I was a leftover for all three years, so I just got tossed into dodgeball since it requires numbers... Will I get to be in the basketball event this time?

“Also, pick one person to be on the ball game competition executive committee.” With that, our teacher ended homeroom and left.

Fujiwara will probably be our committee member. I looked around the class. The room was abuzz with chatter about which event to enter. Everyone was full of life as they talked about the sport they wanted to participate in.

“Natsuki, are you picking basketball?” Reita asked. The usual group had gathered around my seat.

“If the guys are going to play basketball, then I plan on it,” I replied.

“If we’re aiming to win, then it’s better if we do. We’ve got Tatsuya too.”

We essentially had two basketball team members. If we added people with outstanding reflexes like Reita or Hino, winning would be more than just a dream—even if we were only first-years. Of course, that depended on the whole class’s opinion.

“Reita, are you fine with us not playing soccer?” I questioned.

“I don’t mind either way. But I can run the practices if we choose soccer,” he said.

Nanase wore a dejected expression as she let out a heavy sigh. “I’m certainly not excited for this... What should I choose?”

“Ah ha ha! Yui-Yui, you really hate exercise!” Uta exclaimed.

“What about you, Uta-chan? Do you want to play basketball?” Hikari asked.

“Yeah!” Uta paused and surveyed the classroom with a conflicted look. “Is what I want to say, but I think our class would have a stronger boys’ basketball

team. Welp, I like soccer and dodgeball too! I'll give whatever event I'm in one hundred percent!"

"Perhaps I'll play in the same event as Uta and hide behind her," Nanase muttered.

"Yui-Yui, no! I don't mind if we're on the same team, but you need to try!"

Watching Uta and Nanase banter like that calmed me down.

Then someone tapped on my shoulder. I turned around to see Fujiwara standing there. It was rather unusual for her to initiate conversation with me.

I was wondering what she wanted, when she asked me something completely out of left field. "Haibara-kun, will you be the committee member?"

It took me a moment to process her question. "What? Me?" I pointed at myself, eyes wide as saucers.

She nodded, her expression placid as always.

"Fujiwara, aren't you going to do it?"

"I'd intended to, but apparently class representatives aren't allowed to serve both positions." She shrugged.

Oh right. She's our class rep too. Was that a rule? "Still, why me? We've got Reita."

"I don't mind doing it," said Reita, "but I agree you'd be more qualified. Right, everyone?" He glanced around, seeking input from the others, and they all agreed for reasons unknown to me.

"Uh, why?" I cocked my head to the side.

Fujiwara and Reita exchanged a look.

"The executive committee member for the ball game competition is in charge of unifying and leading the class, right?" she said.

"Everyone will happily follow along if you do it," he said.

"No way. That's not true... Right, guys?" I asked, inviting everyone else to speak up. But for some reason, I was met with fervent rebuttals.

“Nah, dude, who else could do it *but* you?”

“The other classes see us as Class Haibara, y’know.”

“Haibara-kun, we’ll all be super motivated if you lead us!”

“Honestly, I don’t give a crap who it is as long as it’s not me, so you’ve got my vote.”

Hey! Whoever just said that is being too honest! Dammit. They were speaking up all at once, so I couldn’t tell who it was... “Okay, I’ll do it. After hearing all that, how can I not?”

That aside, I’m basically forced to accept the role, what with this mood! I-It’s probably just the lingering excitement of the school festival affecting them all, but I still feel genuinely happy that they’re giving me a vote of confidence. Isn’t this another facet of youth? A smug grin crept across my face.

Fujiwara smiled playfully, high-fived Reita, and giggled. “Haibara-kun, you’re too easy.”

“Unexpected as it is, Natsuki’s not used to getting compliments,” Reita explained.

I glowered at Fujiwara. “Hey, did you set me up?”

“I didn’t lie once,” she said with a wry smile.

Hino approached me and smacked my shoulder. “Haibara, you just got punked into doing odd jobs.”

So it really is just a bunch of odd jobs! I knew I had some faint recollection that the exec members just do boring chores! Argh, damn it all!

“The competition is only one day, so you won’t actually have that much to do. It’s a lot easier than being on the executive committee for the school festival. All you need to do is organize our class and help with setup,” Fujiwara added.

Don’t you dare think you can be nice after tricking me...

“Don’t glare at me. I meant every word; I think you’re the most qualified one to do it,” she said.

“Okay, guess I don’t mind doing it.” My sulky response caused everyone

around me to burst into laughter.

“Good luck, Natsuki-kun.” Hikari shot me a supportive smile from the next seat over.

“Hey, I’ll give you a hand if there’s anything I can do to help.” Just as Reita said that, the first period bell rang, and everyone rushed back to their seats.

Reita, you’re good at concluding conversations as always...

We had Modern Japanese during our fourth period, but our teacher decided to give us the second half of class for self-study. Instead, we used this perfect opportunity to decide which events we would enter for the ball game competition. Mito-sensei had a reputation for being kind, and she readily consented.

Since I was on the executive committee, I had to stand at the podium in the front. The entire class’s focus was on me. I thought it’d make me nervous, but I was surprisingly fine. This was nothing compared to how many people had been watching me at the school festival, so perhaps I’d become numb to the attention.

“Here, I’ll take notes for you.” Reita stood up, strolled over to the blackboard, and picked up a piece of chalk.

Wow, he’s actually helping me! I can always count on you, Reita. Thanks, man... “All right, let’s pick our events,” I declared.

“Okaaay,” the class replied dully.

Without another word, Reita wrote out the names of each event on the blackboard.

“First up, how should we decide who’s playing basketball and soccer? Boys or girls?” I asked. The class opinion was remarkably split on that subject.

“It looks like we’ll have to vote on it, then,” Reita suggested.

We did a show of hands, and as a result, it was decided that the boys would play basketball, and the girls soccer. Okajima-kun, who was part of the soccer club, cradled his head in his hands as he lamented.

I suspect that some people knew I wanted to play basketball, so they voted in my favor. I'm probably being overly self-conscious again.

"Natsuki, what next?" Reita prompted, drawing me out of my thoughts.

Oh right. I'm in charge, so we won't get anywhere if I zone out. That's the basics of leadership, but I didn't realize it because I've never organized anything before. Did Reita offer to take notes to cover for me?

"Erm, okay, let's start with soccer. Please raise your hand if you want to play soccer." I kept the meeting going, my tone tentative all the while. I was embarrassed by my inexperience, but I couldn't exactly bolt either. If there were any points of concern, Reita would speak up.

And so after some to-do, we smoothly decided on the players for each event. Dodgeball, soccer, basketball, and volleyball were all popular choices, but we reached a compromise, either through discussion or rock, paper, scissors, so no major issues arose.

I would be playing basketball along with Tatsuya, Reita, Hino, and Okajima-kun. Tatsuya was—needless to say—the basketball team's ace, while Reita and Okajima-kun were part of the soccer team. Hino was the only one who was part of the go home club, but he was exceptionally athletic. We'd assembled my ideal team members by sheer chance.

As for the girls in our friend group, they all got what they wanted, with Hikari in table tennis and Uta and Nanase in the soccer event. Since we're on the topic, Uta, Tatsuya, and Reita would also be participating in dodgeball. We'd have been short on people for some events if everybody only played in one, so five or six people needed to be in two.

"Any other questions? If not, then let's go with this," I said.

Deciding on the events wrapped up smoothly, so everyone used the leftover time for self-study. However, because the teacher wasn't present, we all had excess energy from discussing the ball game competition, and the class quickly devolved into small talk.

Those who were motivated to win chatted about the newly formed teams, while those who weren't as into the competition chatted about TV dramas,

games, and the like. *The classroom's an incoherent cacophony, but that's just how things do be sometimes.*

I didn't like it when I was peer pressured into joining the team spirit mob for events like these. It made me feel out of place... Ugh. Memories of the past are flashing through my mind. Go away! Disappear!

Anyway! Only the people who want to try hard should. My job's just to create an environment where they'll want to give it their all.

Once classes ended, the atmosphere inside our classroom immediately turned laid-back. There were those who hurried to leave, those who stayed behind and chatted, and those who headed to their club activities. Among all that hullabaloo, I was the only one who had to attend to a different matter—the ball game executive committee meeting.

I knew it. This job's a pain in the ass. Damn you, Fujiwara... Meh, I don't have work today, and I've got nothing else to do, so I guess it's fine. Our homeroom teacher had told me which classroom the meeting was to be held in. As I headed over, I saw someone walking in front of me.

"Miori?" I called out to a female student with her black hair pulled into a ponytail.

I'd recognized her correctly; she looked back at me, and her face scrunched into a disgusted frown. "Ugh."

What's with that response? That sort of expression brings back memories of the past, so please stop. People used to hate it if I so much as talked to them... No one reacts like that nowadays, though, so I've been over the moon.

"Hold on, are you an exec member too?" she asked.

"Yeah. What, did they force you into this too?" I replied.

"It was against my will. I was napping when they were picking who it would be, and the job got pinned on me... Dammit." Miori groaned; she looked extremely displeased.

"Sounds like you brought that on yourself."

“I’m gonna be late for practice,” she grumbled. “This blows.”

I caught up to her, and we walked down the hallway side by side. That phone call was the last time we’d spoken. We were in different classes, so there weren’t many opportunities to bump into each other, and now that our partnership was over, we had no reason to call one another either. That was why it felt somewhat awkward now.

Unable to bear the silence, I searched for a topic to chat about. “How’s it going with Reita?”

“What do you mean, ‘how’? Does it look like we’re fighting?”

“No, uh, yesterday on my way home, I saw you guys at the station. It looked like things were going well.”

Miori seemed surprised for some reason. “You were there?” she asked.

“Yeah, I happened to be getting off from work.”

“Really? You could’ve said something.”

“No way I could’ve! I can’t barge in on your alone time with Reita.”

“That’s what stopped you? Wow, I’m surprised you could read the room.”

“Shut up. Even I have that much common sense.”

It was a normal conversation, and yet for some reason, Miori felt faraway, even though she was right next to me. Something was off about her tone, expression, and mood. It didn’t feel as if she was trying to be friendly with me like she used to. However, it didn’t feel like she was pushing me away either. Miori appeared to be uncomfortable as well.

Our conversation came to a stop again. Now that we were no longer partners, we couldn’t grasp how close we ought to be.

“So... How about you?” she asked after a while.

“How about what?”

“Are you doing a good job with Hikari-chan?”

“Well.” I hesitated. “Kinda? Probably, I think... I’m sure...”

“Why’re you being so vague?”

Because it’s possible that I’m the only one who thinks things are going swimmingly. “To begin with, we’ve only been dating for a week. We’ve only gone on one date.”

“Same goes for me. How was I supposed to answer that?” she said sulkily.

I took a long, hard look at Miori. I’d always seen her as my reliable partner, but this was the first time she seemed small.

“What?” she asked with a frown, shifting uncomfortably under my gaze.

“Come to think of it, is Reita your first boyfriend?”

“He is. So what? Got a problem?” Her tone was very sour.

I assumed she had tons of experience in romance, but looks like I was off the mark. Makes sense—I didn’t hear any rumors about her dating in middle school, despite her popularity. So her attitude of knowing everything about men was just her usual tough-guy act. Miori’s always been like that. She shows off and acts brave even when she’s struggling and alone.

“Then you’re in the same boat as me,” I remarked.

“I don’t like how that sounds. Don’t lump me together with you!” She turned pink from embarrassment.

Hah, cute.

“But you get it now, right?” she continued.

“Get what?”

“The reason I said we should stop being partners,” Miori answered after a beat.

Oh, she’s bringing that up.

“I’ve never dated a guy either, so I can’t really lord over you and give you advice anymore. I can only give input on the pre-dating stage.”

“Seriously? That’s why?”

True, Miori and I had formed a cooperative relationship. My benefit had been

that she would offer useful advice on how to execute my Rainbow-Colored Youth Plan. If the subject related to strengthening friendships or getting a girlfriend, then she was confident that she could give me tips based on her experiences. But she'd never dated before either, so she had nothing to say concerning the troubles that came along at that stage.

On the other hand, Miori had benefited from this partnership because I could help her get closer to Reita. Now that she'd achieved her goal, she had nothing more to gain. The conclusion was the same no matter how many times I ran the numbers: we had no reason to remain partners.

I understood that logic. I really did, but our dissolved alliance still stuck with me for some reason.

"If you need someone to rely on going forward, then you've got people way more qualified than me. Besides, I think you're at the point where you can get through anything on your own, without depending on others," Miori said.

"Don't you think you're giving me too much credit there?" *And here I thought you'd be the only one who wouldn't overestimate me.* I felt a little bad. Miori was trying to keep her distance from me, but I didn't want that. "Even if we're not partners in crime, I'd appreciate it if you listened to my concerns normally—as friends who're both only a week into dating. Isn't it normal to ask each other for help?"

She stayed hushed. I couldn't quite put my finger on it, but something unsettled me. What she'd stated was certainly part of her reason for ending our partnership, but I had a feeling that wasn't the whole story. She was probably hiding something from me.

"If you're too friendly with me, Hikari-chan will get jealous, you know?"

"Well, I guess I do get that feeling from her," I admitted, recalling Hikari's reaction when I'd mumbled Miori's name in my sleep. *She was joking, but that doesn't mean it didn't bother her at all.*

"See? Same here. I'll be in a sticky situation if Reita-kun thinks I'm too close to you." Miori let out a sigh of relief. "You also said it over summer break, remember? You told me to stop hanging out at your place. And that goes double now that we're dating other people. It's a good time for us to evaluate

how close we should be.”

She’d left me no room to object. I tried to find the words to reply, but we’d reached our destination. The classroom was full of second and third-years I’d never seen before. It looked like half of the committee was already present.

Where are the first-years? I scanned the room and spotted Mei waving at me, so Miori and I walked over to him.

“Th-Thank goodness you’re here, Natsuki.” He looked like he was about to break into tears. “I was terrified because I didn’t recognize anyone.”

“Hey, Mei. Were you pushed into being on the committee too?” I asked.

“I wouldn’t say I was *pushed* into it... It’s more like I sensed what everyone else wanted.” He laughed as he gazed into the distance with a hollow stare.

Yep, he got pushed into it...

“He’s in the same band as you, right?” Miori asked.

“Yeah. He’s Shinohara Mei. Be nice to him.”

Mei seemed perplexed as he watched Miori and me talk.

“I’m Motomiya Miori. We’re both on the executive committee, so let’s get along.” She shot him a smile so pleasant that it was hard to believe she’d been in a terrible mood moments ago.

Nervous, Mei bowed to her over and over. “Y-Yes! It’s a pleasure to meet you!”

“Ah ha ha...” She laughed awkwardly, unsure how to respond. “I wonder who the last member is?”

“Yeah. Class three’s exec member should be here too,” I said.

Miori was class 1-1’s executive member, I was 1-2’s, and Mei was 1-4’s, so there should’ve been one more first-year, from class 1-3, on the committee. At Ryomei High, each grade was divided into four classes.

As the three of us chatted, a voice called out to us from behind. “Excuse me...”

We turned around; there stood a nervous-looking girl. Her loosely tied black

hair rested on her shoulder, and she wore a pair of blue-rimmed glasses. She was clutching some books in front of her voluptuous breasts.

She came off as plain at a glance, but on closer inspection, I noticed she had cute and pretty features. *I feel like I've seen her before... Or maybe not? Is she a first-year?*

"I'm Funayama Shizuki...from class 1-3." Her voice was shaky; instead of being nervous, she sounded more like she wasn't used to speaking. She mostly kept her gaze to the ground, but on the occasions our eyes did meet, she'd look away.

Though I don't mingle with class three much, I know who the popular kids are... I don't even remember her from my first round of high school. She's probably one of the quiet kids.

"I'm Haibara Natsuki, from class two. Nice to meet you." I greeted her with a smile, trying to create a friendly atmosphere.

"Oh yes... It's nice to meet you." Funayama-san replied with a bow.



Communication didn't seem to be her strong point, but unlike Mei, she had a calm demeanor. Her conduct was relaxed and measured, or to put it more precisely, she had an air of elegance.

"I'm in class one. Motomiya Miori. Since we're all committee members, let's get along!" Miori said cheerfully, grinning widely.

"I know who you two are...naturally. You're both famous," Funayama-san said after a small pause.

"Huh, really? I get why this guy's famous after his rampage at the school festival, but me too?" Miori replied.

"Can you not call it 'rampaging'?" I quipped.

"Serika said that was a good thing for you rock-and-roll types," she shot back.

"Please don't lump Serika's sensibilities with ordinary people's."

"You really sweat the small stuff for a guy. This is why you're not popular... Oh wait, I guess you're already popular."

"Hey, it's hard to respond when you change your mind on the spot."

While Miori and I bantered, Funayama-san and Mei exchanged glances for some odd reason.

"They...seem close," she said.

"That's how outgoing boys and girls mix," he said.

Do those two know each other?

Mei answered that question for me. "W-We've spoken a few times, so... We have... Right?"

"Of course. I haven't forgotten you, Shinohara-kun." Funayama-san smiled sweetly at him.

Evidently, they were on fairly good terms. At the very least, she didn't seem nervous talking to him compared to when she interacted with me and Miori. In spite of that, Mei had still been worried about whether she remembered him or not. Then again, if he was confident about one thing, it was his weak presence.

A third-year boy gently clapped his hands to get everyone's attention. "We're all here, yeah? Cool, then let's hurry up and start so we can go home pronto!" he said. "To kick things off, let's move the desks into a circle."

We stopped chatting and followed his instructions, arranging our desks into a roundish shape fit for a meeting. Once we'd finished moving things, all the committee members sat down. After the room had quieted, the third-year boy began to speak again.

"I'm sure everyone has cram school or clubs to get to, so let's make this quick. We need to pick someone to spearhead the committee, so how about I do it? Thoughts?"

He was handsome; his expression and mannerisms brimmed with confidence. He had a voice that carried well, and though he'd asked the question in a pleasant tone, he possessed a charisma that naturally led people to obey.

I knew him. He was a third-year, Yanagishita Yugo-senpai. He'd recently retired from the basketball team, but he was their former ace and captain.

The third-years teased him, saying things like "You're impatient as ever," but they didn't mean anything by it.

Seeing that there were no objections, Yanagishita-senpai promptly moved the discussion along. "Cool. I'm Yanagishita Yugo, the ball game competition executive committee's new head. I don't like dealing with bothersome things, but I'll see whatever's been left in my hands through. Not that there's much to this job, though."

He made eye contact with the girl sitting next to him as he spoke. At his signal, she began passing out the handouts they'd prepared. *Thorough as always, just like my first time around.*

"The goal of this meeting is to review the rules for each event, and the competition schedule. You might think you know all the games' rules already, but to ensure the competition progresses smoothly, they will be simplified, and the duration of play will be shortened. For example, basketball games will be divided into ten-minute halves. As committee members, your job is to go over these changes with your class."

He stated each piece of necessary information without wasting any words. It was a huge difference from my tottering display of leadership earlier. Yanagishita-senpai clearly had the ability to act as a leader anywhere. He'd always operated like this on the basketball team too—he disliked pointlessness and preferred efficiency.

“These handouts summarize each event’s rules. You’re free to explain, give these out, or do whatever you like. Details that are easy to mistake are listed in red.”

I flipped through the papers. *These are super easy to understand! This’ll be a cinch if I make copies and hand them out to my class.*

“That’s enough about the rules. If there are no questions, we’ll move on to the next topic.”

Our meeting ended in about thirty minutes. Due to Yanagishita-senpai’s efficient approach, we’d covered an incredible amount of information in a mere half hour.

“The committee head, he’s... He’s amazing,” Mei said.

“Yanagishita-senpai, yeah?” Miori said. “He’s extremely talented. He’s really good at basketball too.”

He’s also smart. I believe he’s the top student of his year, I added internally, but it would’ve been odd for me to know that information, so I kept it to myself. Instead, I went with a harmless remark. “Thanks to him, we didn’t need to say anything, and we breezed through the meeting.”

He would occasionally ask us first-years for our opinion, but other than that, we hadn’t played any part in the decision-making. I hadn’t particularly wanted to be involved, so I wasn’t dissatisfied by that, and Yanagishita-senpai had likely understood how we felt. With his personality, if there’d been someone competent and motivated who wanted to be in charge, he would’ve left it to them.

Normally the executive committee would meet around five times before the ball game competition, but with Yanagishita-senpai’s policy of “It’s more annoying to gather everyone up multiple times, so let’s quickly decide

everything we can,” we’d managed to cram a considerable amount of content into one session. At this rate, we would be fine meeting only two more times.

The time-consuming tasks were planning and coordinating the competition day schedule, as well as the breakdown of the point system to determine the class rankings. By convention, it changed slightly every year.

I bet Yanagishita-senpai will think of something by the next meeting.

“Which events are you all playing in?” Miori asked.

The four of us first-years left the room and went down the hallway. We all needed to return to our classrooms, so we were headed in the same direction.

I answered her question first. “Basketball. You?”

“I’m playing soccer. I wanted to play basketball, but we decided the girls would play soccer.” Miori crossed her arms haughtily. “Reita-kun’s going to teach me, so I don’t mind how it turned out.”

She looked like she wanted to say, “Aren’t you jealous?” but I really wasn’t.

Reita’s a genius, so he sucks at teaching people, you know. Though, that was just when it came to academics. Who knows if he’ll be a bad soccer coach too...? Oops, we shouldn’t just carry on our own conversation.

“What about you, Mei?” I asked.

“I’ll also be playing basketball... It happened before I even realized...” The air around him suddenly became shrouded in gloom. “I need to practice hard so I don’t hold my class back... Or else the extroverts will kill me.”

Judging by his attitude, sports must not be his strong suit. He looks like he really doesn’t want to play.

“Ah!” he exclaimed out of nowhere. “That’s right, Natsuki. Aren’t you excellent at basketball? Please, teach me how to play!”

“Sure, I don’t mind,” I began, “but are you serious about practicing?”

Only a handful of students would go through the effort of training on their own for the ball game competition. And I planned to be part of that handful.

“If I don’t practice a little bit, I’ll seriously be useless...” Mei sighed.

Funayama-san, who was walking beside him, watched him closely.

When he noticed her staring, Mei became flustered. “C-Can I help you with something?”

“Oh, no... I’m sorry.” She looked away and bowed.

Huh, that was some weird back-and-forth. “What about you, Funayama-san?” I asked her too.

“I’m...participating in volleyball. As I’ve played it to some extent in the past,” she replied.

“Really? Like in middle school?”

“Yes... Although I quit after half a year.”

Oof, touchy subject. I’d like to keep the conversation lively, but I don’t even know if Funayama-san wants to keep talking to me. It’s hard to tell because her tone doesn’t change.

“Hey, what’re those books you’ve been carrying around?” Miori asked, eyeing Funayama-san’s chest.

“This is my compilation of past ball game competition documents. I was entrusted with being on the executive committee, so I thought it best to study a little bit...”

“Wow, that’s awesome. You’re really diligent,” Miori said in shock.

Funayama-san shook her head. “Unlike other people, I’m clumsy and slow, so this was a necessity.”

Yeeep, that’s something a diligent person would say. “Y’know, the only thing on my mind was hoping this would be over ASAP since it’s a pain in the butt.”

“Of course that’s what you were thinking,” Miori replied.

“What’d you say? I don’t want to hear that from you—you were half asleep during the meeting!”

“Whaaaat? I was awake, barely. Puh-leez, stop making stuff up!”

While we chatted like that, our group split into two—me and Miori in the front, Mei and Funayama-san in the back. *Of course this would happen; Miori*

and I have been talking the whole time... I feel kinda bad. How are Mei and Funayama-san doing?

It was an endless stream of awkward silence behind me. I could feel Mei anxiously crying, "Help me!" with his gaze.

What do you want me to do? I pretended not to notice and returned my eyes to the front.

"Hey, are you listening?" Miori asked.

I nodded.

"So I also told them that you and I are just childhood friends, nothing more. Then I got sorta worked up—I mean, it's not like we're even close or anything. What a joke! And anyway, you've got Hikari-chan now. What's the point in lashing out at me?"

Miori's still the same as always. We were so awkward earlier, but now that we're talking again, she doesn't stop. She looked like she was enjoying herself, though, so I didn't comment on it. Given no other choice, I made interjections every now and then to indicate I was paying attention.

Meanwhile, the two behind us made some progress in communication.

"Excuse me, Shinohara-kun," Funayama-san said. "I watched your concert at the school festival."

"Huh?! Oh, um, thank you very much," he said.

"Shinohara-kun... I'm not very knowledgeable about instruments, but you played bass, correct?"

"Y-Yes! That's exactly right! It's the one that sounds like *DUN, DUN!*" Mei nodded enthusiastically.

Can't you be a bit more composed when you talk?

"So, erm." Funayama-san was having her own share of struggles, and her eyes wandered the halls, searching for something to say. I assumed she was trying to keep the conversation alive, but I was soon proved wrong. "You...were...cool. I'm cheering you on," she said, her cheeks flushing.

Her words were so unexpected that Mei turned to stone, his eyes wide with astonishment.

“I... I used to think you were the quiet type like me, but you did your best on such a conspicuous stage. I thought you were very incredible and cool up there,” Funayama-san continued, her voice unsteady and her face still bright red.

“Um, well, erm, th-thank you...?”

“D-Don’t. Um, that’s just what I thought... I’m sorry.”

Uh, guys, what is this? What the heck did I just hear? I looked over at Miori, and she shrugged. I sneaked a glance behind me; both of them wordlessly walked along, their faces scarlet.

What’s with this mood? This is completely outside of my expectations—what the hell am I supposed to do here?! I feel like I just witnessed the start of a romance manga.

When I got back to my classroom, I received a RINE message from Mei asking to meet up. I’d had a feeling this would happen. In all likelihood, it related to what had just transpired.

I headed to the second music room and opened the door. Mei was aimlessly pacing around. As soon as he noticed me, he rushed over in a panic. *Hey! Don’t cling to me!*

“Wh-What just happened?!” he cried.

“Dude, why’re you asking *me* that?” I replied. *That’s my question! Seriously, what happened between you two?*

“Do you think she mistook me for you?”

“No way she did. She mentioned the bass, remember?”

“Y-Yes, that’s what I thought! So she truly was talking about how cool I was, right?!” He looked absolutely befuddled. “No, that’s impossible...”

You have too little confidence in yourself... “Aren’t you happy? She

complimented you. It turned out to be a good thing that you performed at the festival.”

“Y-Yes, that’s right. Eh heh heh... I rarely receive praise from others, so I’m elated.” His expression slackened into a sloppy, bashful smile. It looked kinda creepy, but I had the compassion not to point that out.

“It looked to me like she has a thing for you,” I said. *Her face was bright red, and she put so much effort into complimenting him—if that’s not a crush, then that’s just too cruel a trap!*

“N-No way... Though to be honest, I *do* want it to be true,” he said, grinning his ears off.

Since I came up here, might as well practice. I unpacked my guitar and began tuning it as I questioned him. “So what do you think about her?”

“I’ve spoken with her a bit in the library, and I’ve always thought she was cute...”

Seems like he’s pretty pleased by this. “Then why not go for her? I felt sparks flying.”

“Y-Yeah, maybe you’re right,” he said. “But don’t you think I’m a terrible match for her?”

“Man, you’re a handful...”

“What?! Your real thoughts are leaking out!”

“If you don’t think you’re a good match, then the conversation ends here,” I said, lightly strumming my guitar.

Mei hugged my leg. “B-But I want to do something about that! My chance is finally here, and in truth, I’ve liked her for a while now! I’m begging you... Natsuki, please help me!”

I kinda gleaned that already, but you should’ve just said so from the beginning! “I don’t have any good advice to offer, though.” My romantic experience also basically amounted to nothing. It would’ve been no exaggeration to say that I knew zilch.

“What are you talking about? You’re dating *the* Hoshimiya-san! You don’t

need to be humble with me. Anyone can tell at a glance that you're teeming with romantic experience." Mei hit my shoulders, silently protesting, *"Don't be like that!"*

You're getting kinda annoying, y'know? For a guy who's confident that you know all about me, you're extremely off base, FYI. "Hikari is my first girlfriend," I told him.

"Still, you used your techniques to win the heart of our school's idol, right? Please teach them to meee!" he begged persistently. "Well, if you were to tell me the gap between our appearances is too wide, then I guess you'd be right..."

"Fine," I said with a wry smile. *He's normally timid, so if he's being this pushy, then he must be serious. I can tell by the look in his eyes that he doesn't want this opportunity to slip away.* "I can help a friend out."

"Yay! Thank you so much!" Mei reacted with an over-the-top cheer of joy.

He resembles the old me, so I can't help but want to lend him a hand. Though, given how the two were acting today, it's very possible he won't need any help from me.

"Wh-What should I do first?" he asked, his voice teeming with excitement.

Is it just me, or is he expecting way too much of me? "First, I think you should wait and see how things play out at our next meeting. If you go too hard out of nowhere, I feel like she'll pull away. You don't even have her contact info, right?"

"Oh, um," Mei said hesitantly. "After we parted ways with you two, she asked me to swap contacts."

Uh, she definitely likes you, then. "Even better—you can wait for her to contact you. It seems like she's going to make the first move."

"Y-You think so? Okay, I will!" Mei nodded, looking somewhat relieved. He'd steeled his resolve to ask me for assistance, but he was still nervous about making a move on a girl. I completely understood that feeling.

"Don't trust my advice too much, all right?"

"It'll be okay!"

What'll be okay? It's probably too late to even bother asking. I wish he'd stop overestimating me so much. I only have safe advice to give. Well, thankfully it looks like they'll get together even if I only give him safe advice.

Quite a long time had passed since I'd begun playing my guitar in the second music room. It was now completely dark outside. *I should head out. I got too absorbed in practice.* Mei had left for work a while ago, so I was alone.

On my way home, my feet brought me towards the gym for some reason. I looked down at the courts from the second floor; it seemed like clubs were finished with practice too. Given the time, that only made sense, but there were still a few people around. Our gym had three courts, and the girls' basketball team was holding free practice on the one closest to the school building.

"Forty-six...!"

There was no way I could've mistaken her for someone else—it was Sakura Uta. She had a cage full of basketballs next to her as she single-mindedly took shots over and over.

"Forty-seven...!"

She kept shooting from outside the three-point line. When she ran out, she collected the scattered balls. She repeated this process endlessly.

Uta only counted the shots she made. Her accuracy wasn't great by any means, but her concentration was hair-raising. I couldn't take my eyes off of her. As I watched, she soon became the only student left.

The gym was still as death, except for the rhythm of balls hitting the floor, balls hitting the rim, and balls swishing through the hoop. These three noises reverberated continuously.

"Worried?" said a voice from behind me.

I turned around. Miori approached me in her practice clothes as she wiped her neck with a towel.

"No, I was heading home and just got a little curious," I said.

"Uta's been like that for a while now. Ever since you rejected her, that is."

I'd been vaguely aware of that. But in spite of myself, my face twisted into a frown when Miori pointed it out.

"Hey, don't torment yourself over it. I don't think it's a bad change," she added.

"You think so?"

"Yeah. She's working really hard, but not excessively. And if she overdoes it, I'll stop her. All she's doing is giving up on her crush and channeling those feelings into basketball. I don't think it's a problem," Miori said as she watched Uta.

I was concerned, but Miori's evaluation of the situation was probably more accurate than mine, since she'd been practicing with Uta all year.

"Actually, I think she could become a starter, and now's when she needs to give her all."

"Really?"

"Yep. The second-year who plays the same position as her, Miyata-senpai, is out of the picture because of an injury. Uta's hampered by her height, but she's got the technical skills to make up for it. If only she could expand her court vision just a bit more... Well, that's not something that improves quickly," Miori said matter-of-factly. "That's why she's trying to create a weapon that's easy to see."

"Three-pointers, huh?" I murmured. We observed Uta earnestly practicing shooting threes. "So what were you doing?"

"Me? I was in the weight room."

Ah, building up those muscles. No wonder she's dripping with sweat.

"And you? Were you practicing the guitar?"

"Pretty much. Our band's taking a break, but we're still practicing on our own."

"How passionate. Well, if you hadn't put in that much effort, you couldn't have held such a killer concert," Miori said. She turned her back to me and went into the gym again.

She's fired up too. I can tell, even from behind. Immense happiness welled up inside of me—her reliable figure overlapped with the one I knew from the past.

“Oh, that’s right,” Miori said, suddenly remembering something, and then glanced over her shoulder. “Funayama-san asked me for advice. You know, the girl from the committee?”

“Uh-huh. Don’t tell me...” At that moment, I had a feeling I knew what this would be about.

“She’s into Shinohara-kun. Since they’re working together in the same committee, she wants to use the opportunity to get closer to him... She came to me for help, but I don’t feel like I can do much for her.” Miori wore her typical conflicted expression.

We both smiled dryly.

“She’s got the wrong idea about me. She thinks I know all the ins and outs of romance or that I’m some kind of battle-hardened veteran just because I’m dating Reita-kun!” Miori let out a troubled laugh.

Well, Reita is the most popular guy in our year... Miori must look like a romance master since she’s dating him. So basically, Funayama-san shares the same logic as Mei. He’s also under the wrong impression about me because I’m dating Hikari.

“Mei asked me for advice too. He’s liked Funayama-san for a while now and wants to do something about it, so he asked me for help. But what am I supposed to do, you know?” I said.

Miori blinked in surprise. “What? You too? Then we don’t need to do anything, right?”

“Well, this pretty much confirms that their crushes are mutual.”

“What the heck! Then we can just cheer them on from the bleachers and it’ll work out. That takes a load off my shoulders!” Miori said, relieved.

Because of her caring personality, she tended to become motherly whenever someone came to her for help, even if she didn’t know them well. That trait of hers was why she’d always been concerned about me, and why she always saw

things through until they reached a proper conclusion.

“Yeah, it’s just a matter of time now,” I said. *It’s huge that I was able to confirm Funayama-san likes Mei. I don’t know much about love, but there’s no way nothing happens between them. Yeah! This is a shoo-in for sure. With that, let’s hurry on home and take a bath.*

“All right, then. I’ll make Uta stop now and go home,” Miori said.

“Right... I’ll go on ahead of you guys.”

“Yeah... I think that’d be good.”

It’d just be awkward if I waited for them.

“Okay, see ya.” Miori waved goodbye.

After she turned away from me, I watched her disappear and then headed home.

Chapter 2: Consultation Center for Romance Newbies

Hoshimiya Hikari: What're you doing now?

Natsuki: I just finished taking a bath. In my room now

Hoshimiya Hikari: I see

Hoshimiya Hikari: I'm about to sleep

Natsuki: You go to bed so early

Hoshimiya Hikari: But I wake up late

Natsuki: They say kids need to sleep to grow

Hoshimiya Hikari: You go to sleep late but you're tall

Natsuki: Because I slept 12 hours a day when I was kid

Hoshimiya Hikari: Ehhh, I can't sleep that much lol

Hoshimiya Hikari: Hey, are you free this weekend?

Natsuki: I'm free~ Wanna do something?

Hoshimiya Hikari: Yeah, something! Lol

Natsuki: What's the something lol. Is there someplace you wanna go?

Hoshimiya Hikari: There are! Tons!

Hoshimiya Hikari: I wanna talk for a bit

Natsuki: Wanna call?

Hoshimiya Hikari: Yeah! I'll call you~

"Kuaaah," I yawned.

"You sound sleepy," Reita remarked with a wry smile.

"Hikari and I were on a call yesterday, and next thing I knew, it was the middle of the night..." I was sleep-deprived thanks to that. I'd been taking great pains to fight against the drowsiness during our first period. Hikari was blissfully fast asleep next to me, but we would've stood out if I'd also slept, so I was forced to

stay awake.

“I’m glad you’re getting along, but try not to sleep in the next class.”

Our next class was English. Each grade had its English classes at the same time, and the students were divided up by our test scores. Reita and I were in the most advanced level, A class. Nanase had also been in the same class up until our previous end-of-term exam, but English wasn’t her forte, so she’d fallen to the B class. Currently, Reita and I were the only ones in the advanced class from our friend group.

“Yeah, I know. It’s Kato-sensei’s class we’re talking about here,” I said.

Kato-sensei, the English teacher in charge of the A class, was easy to understand but irritable. And if you got the tiniest bit distracted, the lesson would instantly leave you behind in the dust. Plus, anyone caught sleeping was likely to get chewed out.

“What did you two talk about so late into the night?” Reita asked.

“Mm... We were discussing where to go for our date this weekend.”

Hikari had sent me all sorts of information over RINE, which had pumped up our conversation. The vast majority of the places she’d sent were sightseeing spots that we couldn’t go to immediately, and we’d ended up deviating from our original topic of finding a date spot for this weekend. But she’d sounded so excited, saying things like “Let’s go one day! We have to!” that I didn’t have the heart to stop her. I went along with it, and before long the time had crept past 2 a.m.

It was fun, but I’m sleepy...

“So what’d you ultimately decide on?”

“Well... We’re going to hang out at my place.”

Reita’s eyes widened in surprise. *Yep, I’d react like that too.*

“You’re not going out somewhere?”

“We wanted to, but when we thought about it more, we realized we’re both tight on cash,” I explained.

Though I had income from working, purchasing my guitar and gear had eaten up pretty much all of my savings. I'd spent a good bit on the school festival wrap-up party and our date last week too, so if I didn't save until my next paycheck in two weeks, I'd be in hot water. I also had my band's wrap-up party to think about.

Hikari didn't have any money left this month either. Normally she received an allowance and could ask for more if she needed it, but it likely wouldn't fly if she told her parents she wanted extra to go play with her boyfriend. Furthermore, she didn't want to rely on her father too much. *Poor papa... I pity him, but you reap what you sow.*

"But an at-home date? Don't you think you're skipping a few steps?" Reita questioned.

"Honestly, I kinda agree," I said. *But won't it sound like I'm being too self-conscious about it if I tell her that?*

"Well, you and Hoshimiya-san are the type who'd like relaxing at home. When I think about it, an at-home date really suits you two. It's nice that you can let loose and take your time." He changed his mind and nodded in understanding.

He's observant as always...

As I admired him, Reita grinned and patted my shoulder. "Have fun canoodling, but don't get too wild, okay?"

For a split second, I wondered what he'd meant by that, but after a beat, I understood what he was implying. An image flashed through my mind—Hoshimiya Hikari lying down on my bed. "Huuuh?! Dude, it's only our second date!"

"Class is starting, Natsuki." In contrast to my panicked fluster, Reita just smiled and went to his seat.

Dammit, don't tease me... I feel like he's the only guy I can never win against. What's that? I'm just too weak against love talk for someone who's on his second round of life? Yes. You're exactly right.

I managed to get through English with sheer willpower, and then we had gym next. Starting today until the ball game competition, we would be practicing for each event. Our gym classes were shared with class 1, while classes 3 and 4 held theirs together. This meant that those of us in 1-2 faced and practiced alongside 1-1.

After we finished running and warm-up exercises, as directed by our gym teacher, we all began to haphazardly practice shooting on our own. *If I leave everyone to their own devices, we'll spend all our time leisurely taking shots at this rate.*

Murakami-kun, the leader of class one, came up to me. "What's your plan?"

Why're you asking me? He probably thinks I'm the heart of our class. "Hmm... It's a tough call. We want to practice, but where do we start from?"

"It's simpler to just scrimmage, yeah?" Tatsuya cut in while I fretted over what to do. "We *could* do basic drills, but not many guys can keep up."

He was exactly right. And above all, playing a match was way more fun. Plus, the quickest method to acclimate the amateurs was throwing them into an actual game.

"Well, that's true. Then let's have a scrim, class one versus class two," Murakami-kun suggested.

"Yeah," Tatsuya said.

With that, our course was decided. Reita, Hino, and Okajima-kun gathered around Tatsuya and me.

"Should we pick our positions?" Reita asked.

"I'll fill in the guards and pass the ball around. Reita, you support me. Okajima, stay under the hoop." Tatsuya handed out instructions while spinning a ball on his finger.

I understood what he was getting at. Reita could flawlessly perform anything you asked of him, and he had a wide vision, so he was the most suitable for support. Okajima-kun was tall and well-built, so he'd be a strong contender for rebounds.

Suddenly, Tatsuya threw the spinning ball towards me. “And Natsuki, you mess ‘em up.”

I caught the ball. “I thought our roles would be reversed. Wouldn’t you make a better forward?”

“Dude, I’m in the basketball club. It’d be immature to go all out. Hanging back and passing the ball around is just right for me.” A tired yawn escaped from his mouth.

“Wait, what about me? Hey, Nagiura! Don’t forget about me!” Hino exclaimed.

“Huh? Hino, just do whatever, and we’ll win,” Tatsuya replied.

“Why am I the only one who gets neglected?!”

As I watched them banter comedically, a thought crossed my mind. *I get what Tatsuya is saying. It’s just the ball game competition; it’d be childish for a basketball team member to play seriously and mow down beginners. I’m sure there’re plenty who’d agree. But even taking that into account, I didn’t expect to hear as much from him. Tatsuya struck me as the type who’d want to be the star for events like this.*

Reita seemed to think the same as we gave each other a look. But we didn’t have the opportunity to comment—it was time for the tip-off. The ball soared high up in the air. Okajima-kun leaped for it and smacked it in front of Tatsuya.

“Aight then, let’s score first.” Tatsuya dribbled up and passed to Reita.

Seeing that Reita was on the right wing when he caught the ball, I moved to the corner. “Reita!”

I caught his pass and turned to the front. A student wearing a number four pinny stuck to me. Our gazes locked. I flicked my eyes towards Reita and simultaneously stepped over the line with my right foot.

“Huh?!” the student cried out in surprise as I pulled past him.

I veered into a layup, stretching my arm towards the hoop, but the student wearing number six came to cover me. I retracted my hand and instead passed the ball to Hino, who was now unguarded.

“O-Oh?!” Hino shouted, taken aback by the ball abruptly flying at him.

“Shoot! You’re free!” I yelled.

Hino did as ordered and took a shot—the ball cleanly went through the hoop.

“Nice one. Amazing as always, Natsuki.” Reita high-fived me, showing his pearly whites.

“Haibara, you’re too good!” Okajima-kun roared, surprise coloring his face.

Reita and Tatsuya are chill about it because they already know about my skills, but it must be shocking for everyone else, huh?

Hino thumped my back. “Whoa, Haibara, I didn’t know you were a basketball boss!” He grinned widely and gave me a thumbs-up.

“That was a great shot, Hino,” I said, returning to defense.

“All right! Let’s defend this!” Okajima-kun yelled enthusiastically.

This guy’s loud as always. A dry smile inadvertently crept across my face.

“Man-to-man good enough?” I asked Tatsuya to confirm our defensive strategy.

“Should be fine. I’ll take Murakami,” he replied.

Class one’s offense started with Murakami-kun bringing the ball in. He wasn’t part of the basketball team, but his movements were clearly those of an experienced player. The ball practically stuck to his hand when he dribbled. Still, he had a lot on his shoulders facing off against Tatsuya, an active member of the team.

“Dammit... I can’t shake him off!”

Frustrated by our defense, class one took a desperate shot—and missed. The ball clanged against the hoop and bounced upward.

“Raaaaaah!” Okajima-kun leaped up, his huge body dancing in midair. He firmly snatched the ball with both hands and then landed. Having secured the rebound, he passed to Tatsuya. “Okay! Tatsuya!”

“That was an incredible vertical jump,” Reita remarked in approval.

“In our club, aerial battles in front of the goal are my strong suit too,” Okajima-kun said.

Right, they're both on the soccer team.

"Cool, let's snag another point." Tatsuya dribbled the ball from our half of the court into the other.

"Tatsuya!" I called from the wing. He sent the ball my way. I caught it, but when I looked in front of me, Murakami-kun was marking me. *Huh? Shouldn't he be on Tatsuya?*

Murakami-kun read the question in my expression and answered, "It doesn't look like he's playing seriously, so I'm gonna stop you first."

He's realized that Tatsuya's intent on only passing from behind already? That's some snappy judgment. And he doesn't have any chinks in his defense either. It'll be hard to get past him.

"So you used to play basketball, Haibara? Didn't know that." Murakami-kun licked his lips, his eyes following all my movements.

I should return the ball to Tatsuya so we can reposition, but... "Eh, I'll give it a try." I wanted to test whether I could take him down.

I swayed gently. *Right? Left? Pass? Shoot?* I purposefully kept my movements relaxed and made a fake, toying with the ball in my hand. My tempo was the most crucial—stillness into movement. I stepped in all at once, driving to my right.

Murakami-kun reacted, though a beat late, and stuck right next to me. I could've continued forcing my way in and gone for a layup, but I did the unexpected and dribbled between my legs, stepping back. My sudden stop put space between us.

"What?!"

Murakami-kun's posture crumbled while I stayed level and took a jump shot. The ball floated through the air; though it bumped into the hoop, it barely went through the net.

"Seriously?" Murakami-kun fell on his butt, slack-jawed.

"Needed a bit more force..." I muttered. *We got the second goal, but my ballhandling is off since it's been so long. I need to play more, or else I won't be*

able to fix this. I'd better practice on my own to get my touch back.

"Nice, Natsuki. That was pretty slick," Tatsuya said.

"Thanks," I replied.

When he praised me, his tone had been the same as usual. He didn't seem to be behaving especially differently, but that actually felt weirder. *When Tatsuya plays basketball, he's more...*

"Tatsuya, is something wrong?" I asked.

"Huh? Nah, not really." He furrowed his brows. "Something weird?"

Seeing that he genuinely seemed to have nothing on his mind, I shook my head. "No, never mind."

Something felt off, but nothing was visibly amiss. In that case, I had no place to intrude. That was my conclusion for now.

As for the practice match, we ended up crushing class one, making double their score.

"Hey, don't you think we've got a chance? We can win the ball game competition."

"We've got Nagiura and Haibara for basketball, and all the athletic girls are playing soccer. And didn't Fujiwara used to play volleyball? For table tennis...there's Hoshimiya... Actually, forget it."

"The upperclassmen are going to be on a different level, though. I'd have more hope if it were just first-years."

After school, while Hino's friend group talked about the competition in high spirits, I exited our classroom. I had the second executive committee meeting to attend today.

"Oh."

"Sup," I said.

Just as I stepped out, I happened to run into Miori. It would've been weirder if we'd deliberately headed over separately, so we walked next to each other.

“What are we doing today, again?” she asked.

“We’re adjusting the point system, making stuff for bulletin boards, and other miscellaneous tasks,” I answered, recalling Yanagishita-senpai’s words.

“Hoo, boy... Sounds like a pain,” she groaned. “Hey, isn’t the student council supposed to help out?”

“Our student council has no drive,” I lamented understandingly. The student council also possessed little authority, so they rarely meddled with each event’s committee. *That’s why the exec committees at our school have more duties compared to others... I think. Probably. I’ve only ever attended Ryomei, so I don’t know if that’s actually true.*

“Oh, Natsuki! Hello,” Mei said when he saw me, and rushed over.

We are going to the same place at the same time, so of course we’d bump into each other on the way.

“I’m looking forward to today’s committee meeting!” Mei smiled brightly.

What is there even to look forward to?

“Is it because Funayama-san’s going to be there?” Miori asked.

“Weeell...” He giggled shyly.

“Ohooo,” she said playfully. “So *that’s* how it is.”

“P-Please don’t tell her!”

“I won’t. You need to convey those kinds of feelings on your own.”

As Mei and Miori chatted, the three of us turned the corner and saw Funayama-san walking up ahead. Mei’s shoulders immediately began to quake visibly as he became overwhelmed by his nerves.

“C’mon, go talk to her,” Miori said.

“Wh-Whaaat?! We’re all here, so why me?!” Mei cried.

“You’ll make a better impression if you say hi first. Or something,” I said.

While we were squabbling, Funayama-san noticed us and turned around. “Hello,” she said, bowing with great care.

“H-Hello!” Mei said. Clearly at his wit’s end, he added an unnecessary comment. “The weather is nice today!”

It’s cloudy today. Also, weather decks are fundamentally weak, so I don’t recommend them.

Funayama-san looked out the window and then with uncertainty said, “Yes...it’s cloudy.”

“Y-Yes, it is... I’m sorry.”

She fell silent, and Mei laughed awkwardly. *Bro, what are you doing?* He continued expelling a hollow chuckle, so Funayama-san lost her avenue into the conversation. *Come on, you guys must have something else! Do you two actually want to get closer?!*

Unable to bear the pressure of socializing with his crush, Mei looked at me anxiously. *Don’t look at me like that. It’s your fault for only prepping a weather deck! I’ll have you know that this time around, at the outset of the school year, I built over ten conversation decks to have in my repertoire at all times! My preparations are meticulous and flawless, and I play each card with the utmost care.*

Normal people don’t go that far? Hey, I’m on my second round of life, so I’m already not normal...!

“The committee meeting’s a real hassle, but let’s do our best.” I chose to enter their far-too-barren conversation by making a bland remark.

“I hope this ends in a jiffy,” Miori chimed in. Though she wore a smile, her eyes betrayed her exasperation and her thoughts of, *“What the heck are they doing?”*

My feelings exactly. Mei and Funayama-san were clearly relieved by our intervention. *Guys, don’t be relieved! Converse!* I stood next to him and furtively whispered into his ear, “Mei, can I have a sec?” I glanced at Miori, signaling, *“Hey, distract Funayama-san for a hot sec!”*

She nodded, exasperation written all over her face. “Say, Funayama-san... Actually, can I call you Shizuki-chan?”

“Huh? Oh yes, of course. I don’t mind.”

When the other two had jumped into their own conversation, Mei asked in a hushed voice, “Wh-What is it?”

“Can’t you talk some more?”

“I... I don’t know how to make conversation.”

“Listen carefully. The trick to carrying on a conversation is to be interested in the other person.”

Even if you weren’t interested in them, you needed to pretend like you were. And what did that specifically entail? Ask questions about them. That was the foundation of conversation. I was merely repeating the smattering of knowledge that I’d heard from someone else, but based on my experiences, it was correct.

“Of course I’m interested in her, but...”

I knew Mei was genuinely interested in the girl named Funayama Shizuki. “Then all you need to do is show her that fact,” I said. Deepening a relationship meant learning about the other person.

He braced himself and turned to her. “Um, Funayama-san.”

“Y-Yes?” she responded, her shoulders stirring slightly.

“You mentioned that you watched the school festival concert, right?” he asked.

“Y-Yes.”

“Do you possibly like rock music?”

Starting with that first? He’s a music otaku, so that’s very him.

“Yes, I do,” she replied. “It might be somewhat unexpected, but I listen to quite a lot of rock. Especially Western bands.”

“I... I like Western rock too! Which bands do you like?”

“I...like Oasis. I’m sure you’ve heard of them, right?”

“O-Of course! How could I not have? They’re extremely famous! I like them

too! 'Morning Glory' is a masterpiece! Oh, and another Oasis song..."

The moment the topic turned to music, Mei spoke rapidly and at length, as was the otaku way. He'd settled into his comfort zone, perhaps too much, but Funayama-san listened and gladly responded with her own input. *Looks like their hobbies match up; this is the ideal solution. They should've just done this from the get-go!*

"Yeesh," I muttered. *These guys need a lot of babysitting.* I glanced to the side, and my eyes met Miori's. She was smiling wryly. "Is this how you always felt with me?"

She shrugged. "Maybe not. You weren't this difficult."

"When did you become my mom? I feel like I bothered you a ton." It finally struck me that Miori hadn't exactly been my partner in crime. *Just how much was I relying on her?*

"You think so? You're the one who helped me. Anyone could've told you what I did. You didn't actually need *me*." She shook her head gently.

"My high school debut only succeeded *because* of your help," I said. I'd originally been fated to drab, gray days just like my first round of high school. "If you weren't here, I wouldn't be where I am today. You changed the color of my youth."

That's why her assertion had made me oddly indignant. "I'm grateful to you," I continued. "I needed *you*. So don't say that."

Miori's expression crumpled, and she bobbed her head. "Sorry."

Mei and Funayama-san had stopped chatting at some point and were now staring at us. *Crap...! I shouldn't be talking about this here. I ended up interrupting their moment.* "Oops, sorry, sorry! It's an us thing; forget about it."

"Y-Yeah," Miori added. "Don't worry, you two. Just keep chatting each other up."

Mei and Funayama-san nodded, hopefully convinced by our attempt to smooth things over. While we were chatting, we'd reached the executive committee's classroom of operations. Around half the members were already

there. The upperclassmen leisurely made small talk.

“Hello!” I exclaimed.

I was met with a chorus of “Sup!” and “Hey!”

Mei and the others bowed their heads too, exchanging a similar string of greetings before entering the room.

“Th-That was amazing, Natsuki,” Mei said.

“What was? All I did was say hello,” I told him. *Though, I didn’t know a single person there, so it was hard for me to speak up. But it’d reflect poorly on us if all four first-years came in without greeting our seniors, you know? Plus, even if we barely know each other, we are on the same committee...*

“You wouldn’t have been able to do that in the past.”

At Miori’s remark, I realized: *I can do these sorts of things automatically now! Maybe I’ve also matured. I feel like not too long ago, I hesitated over every little action.*

“Um, can I ask a question?” Mei whispered after we sat down beside each other.

“What’s up? You two had a good vibe going on,” I replied.

“Oh, uh... It’s not about that,” he said, his tone evasive.

Then what’s it about? I cocked my head to the side.

“Is Motomiya-san your ex-girlfriend?”

“Huuuh?!” *Crud!* I’d inadvertently yelled loudly, attracting all the attention in the room to myself. I hastily bowed to the staring upperclassmen. “Dude, don’t ask me weird shit out of nowhere,” I hissed in a low voice.

“W-Was it that weird? Anyone would think the same after hearing your conversation,” Mei said, baffled.

Oh, our conversation? It’s certainly not something I’d want other people to hear, but I don’t understand how that led him to conclude that she’s my ex-girlfriend! “She’s not my ex. We’re just friends.”

“Just friends...? I find that even harder to believe, though...”

I'm telling the truth, but Mei's still doubting me for some reason. What's so hard to believe about it?

"Okaaaay, attention, please. Let's kick things off!" Ultimately, Yanagishita-senpai began the committee meeting, so I couldn't ask my question. Things progressed steadily. For the most part, since he'd created an outline of what we were required to decide today, all we needed to do was give our opinion on the particulars. I listened to the discussion:

"Then that settles the point breakdown for each event."

"No objections here. What's next?"

"The schedule for the day. I made a rough draft; if you have any opinions, please speak up."

"Our gym has three courts, which comes in handy for these sorta events."

"Right? It's possible to adjust the schedule even if there are delays. Doesn't this work out fine?"

Just when I thought we'd finished making the necessary decisions and were about to wrap up, someone unexpected raised her hand.

"Excuse me. If we follow this schedule, I don't think the court near the school building will have enough leeway," Funayama-san said.

It'd chiefly been third-years participating in the discussions, so everyone else was also surprised when she spoke up.

"Hmm... Good point, maybe we should allot more playtime there." Yanagishita-senpai rubbed his chin, carefully considering her opinion.

"But wouldn't that be hard?" said one of his third-year supporters, frowning. "The school-side court is for boys' basketball, right? Unlike the other events, the matches are longer, and there are more boys' teams this year. If we don't cut down somewhere, then we'll never finish."

Honestly, I hadn't been paying much attention to the deliberation, but I somehow pieced together the problem. Because boys and girls got to choose whether to play basketball or soccer, the number of teams for each event changed yearly. This time, there were more boys playing basketball, and more

girls for soccer. Thus, the issue was that the court closest to the school, which was mainly allocated for boys' basketball, didn't have any wiggle room.

"Do you have a concrete proposal?" Yanagishita-senpai asked.

"Yes... I wrote it here on my handout. What do you think about this?"

Funayama-san submitted her revised schedule to him.

The third-years reviewed it, and before long, Yanagishita-senpai gave her a thumbs-up. "Okay! Let's go with this, then! You're Funayama-chan, right? Thanks."

"Oh, not at all... My apologies for being impertinent."

"Hey, now! You don't need to be so humble! You really saved us a lot of trouble. Also, thanks to you other first-years for giving your input. Sorry that we've been carrying on at our own discretion," he said and then turned his gaze on me. "You're Haibara-kun, yeah? The school festival concert was super awesome! It was inspirational."

"Huh? Oh yes. Thank you very much."

It was a strange sensation. I couldn't shake the feeling that Yanagishita-senpai was still my captain on the basketball team, but here he was treating me as a first-year member of the light music club. Though, that was a given.

I was fond of him. We'd only been in contact for a short period, from the spring when I'd joined the team until he retired in the summer, but he'd looked out for the annoying underclassman that was myself nonetheless.

"Which event are you entering?" he asked.

"Basketball," I answered.

"Oh! Very nice. I'm also playing basketball. Let's have a good match if we face each other, okay?" he said amicably, and gently patted me on the shoulder.

"I'm not gonna lose, though. I might have retired this summer, but I *was* still the captain of the basketball team."

He grinned boldly. The glint in his eyes told me he was serious; he didn't consider this a trifling ball game competition. But I understood why. He always meant business when it came to any sort of competition.

“I’m not going down either. I might not look it, but I’m pretty good at basketball,” I said.

“Oho! Well said! Excellent, it won’t be any fun if you aren’t feisty.” Yanagishita-senpai chuckled happily. Then he scanned each first-year in turn and said, “Hey, this is a special event. Let’s drop the stuffy formalities and have the time of our lives.”

It would’ve been fishy hearing that from someone else, but it sounded convincing coming from him. Plus, as a person redoing my teen years, I could empathize with his attitude. *I can’t force others to try hard, but if we’re going to do this, then it’ll be more fun if we go all out. You’re only young once, after all.*

Wait, I’m on my second run, though...

“Shizuki-chan, you were on point today. I was shocked,” Miori said.

The four of us first-years walked back to our classrooms together. It was our second time doing so, making it customary now.

“Not at all,” Funayama-san replied humbly. “I didn’t say anything of significance.”

She seemed troubled, but I couldn’t agree with her assessment.

“No way! It’s amazing you could speak so confidently with all the third-years around!” Miori said and sneaked a peek at Mei.

Understanding her signal, he nodded. “I think so too.” He then laughed with a faraway look. “I would’ve been too nervous to say anything back there,” he added self-deprecatingly.

You were just supposed to compliment her there—you didn’t need to put yourself down! I fretted over how she would respond, but Funayama-san shook her head.

“That’s not true. Shinohara-kun, you performed in front of such a large crowd at the school festival, remember? You even pumped your fist in the air during your introduction.”

“P-Please don’t bring that up so often,” he mumbled, his face flushing red

with embarrassment.

Upset, Funayama-san puffed her cheeks up. “I will bring it up. You inspired me. Pardon my poor choice of words, but normally you’re like me... I thought you were the plain and quiet sort, but you were incredibly dazzling up there... That made me think I could change too—it made me *want* to change.”

Mei looked overwhelmed by her earnestness. *It might seem unbelievable, but our music reached all kinds of people. Your bass, your courage, it moved people’s hearts. Good for you. I mean it.* For some reason, it felt like the praise he’d received was my own, and I was thrilled.

“Unlike you, I can’t do anything grandiose, but I presumed even *I* could state my opinion... I was nervous, but I managed to do it.” Funayama-san’s expression softened with relief.

I’d assumed she was the type who could unexpectedly speak up in those sorts of settings, but looks like I was wrong. She mustered up her courage and resolved to change herself.

Mei was petrified, his mouth hanging open. I patted his back. He looked at me, confused and still not convinced that this wasn’t all just a dream.

“Natsuki, the fact that someone would say such nice things to me is all because you invited me to the band,” he said.

“Nope, it’s the fruit of your efforts. Have some confidence.” I thumped him on the back once more, trying to return him to reality.

“Incidentally... Shinohara-kun, what kind of bands do you like?” Funayama-san asked, changing the subject to music.

“Oh, I like Sonic Youth,” he replied. “My favorite is their album *Goo*. I also like the Red Hot Chili Peppers and Radiohead. What else? Uhhh, they’re all very famous, but...”

I wasn’t *that* well versed in Western bands, so I couldn’t keep up with the conversation. Miori pretended to follow along, but question marks were practically plastered on her face. *Welp, I saw this coming.*

“Oh,” Funayama-san suddenly said. “Are you going to have another concert?”

I'd love to watch."

Mei and I wore inscrutable expressions as we exchanged looks. She wasn't the first one to ask us; we'd gotten that question from many others. However, our band was through. We didn't know if we'd restart with a new member. Even now, we were waiting for Serika's answer.

And today, she wouldn't show up to the second music room either.

After the executive committee meeting had ended, Mei and I went to a park near the school that had a basketball court. I'd used it sometimes during my first go-round too.

It was around 6 p.m., and the sky was dyed in the colors of sunset. The days had grown considerably shorter, but the park was equipped with floodlights, so we could play without issue even after it got darker.

"You know, I didn't think I'd actually be teaching you basketball." I took out the ball that we'd bought at a nearby sports shop and tossed it to Mei.

He managed to catch it despite being somewhat panicked. "I was half joking as well...but Funayama-san told me she'd cheer for me. I'm terrible at sports, but I want to do my best so I can show her my cool side."

"Hoo, you two are hitting it off well. Now you just need to confess."

"P-Please don't make it sound so easy! It seems like she doesn't loathe me, but maybe she's merely worried about me. Besides, it's only been a few days since we started holding proper conversations. A confession comes only after we get closer."

"Don't worry. Trust me, you got this."

"You had the gall to confess up on the big stage—please don't lump me together with you!"

"Hey, I was really nervous then too."

I understood where Mei was coming from. He didn't want to confess if there was the possibility of rejection. He wanted to be absolutely positive that she'd say yes. Why? Because there was a chance he might lose her. It took courage to

change your relationship with someone.

Miori had informed me how Funayama-san felt about him, so I knew he wouldn't fail. It seemed like they were taking forever from my point of view, but it would've been bad form to tell him that. I was in a tricky position.

"We exchanged RINE information. We'll keep building rapport from here on out," Mei said with a determined expression, and then threw the ball back to me.

His form loosely resembled how you'd throw a baseball, which made it very awkward. *We should start with passing.*

"Keep the ball at your chest and make a triangle with your thumbs and pointer fingers. Then, step forward with one leg and snap your wrists. Imagine you're putting your weight on the ball as you push." I explained how to do a chest pass and threw the ball back to Mei.

"Whoa, whoa!" he exclaimed as he fumbled with it, and ended up dropping it on the ground.

"For receiving a pass, ready your hands in front of your chest. Don't be scared, and bring the ball in towards you. You struggled to catch it just now because you threw your hands out. Wait, and then catch," I said, weaving gestures into my instruction.

Mei nodded. "O-Okay!"

After that, we repeatedly passed the ball back and forth. He didn't have a knack for basketball by any standard, but he was sincere. *He must really want to look cool in front of Funayama-san. I can empathize with that motive, and it makes me wanna help him. If he's going to take this seriously, then it'll be more fun to teach him.*

"Nice, nice! You're getting it now. But push with your body more."

"Okay! L-Like this?!"

"Not quite! Look, do it like *this*!"

"Like this?!"



“Erm... Not quite!” I said. “Look, it’s more like this!”

“I got it! Like this!”

“No, that’s completely wrong.”

“Whaaat?!”

We repeated this process of trial and error over and over to drill the fundamental passing motion into Mei. He became disheartened multiple times, but I hadn’t originally had the knack for basketball either. I was certain that with steady practice, he would improve little by little. There were occasions when an ordinary person’s hard work could surpass a prodigy.

Just like when I defeated Tatsuya...

“All right! Your passing is getting there. I think you’ll be pretty helpful in a match like this,” I said.

“Th-Thank you very much!” Mei exclaimed. “It’s all thanks to you!”

“Mm-hmm, then next, we’ll work on shooting.”

“Huh? We’re...not done for the day yet?”

“What’re you saying? You’re going to show Funayama-san how cool you are, right?”

“Ha... Ha ha ha... Yes, you’re right.” He should’ve been brimming with motivation, but instead his eyes were swimming for some reason.

Does he feel bad for taking up my time? He doesn’t need to worry about that!

And thus, I taught Mei the fundamental shooting form next.

By the time I’d more or less broken down the various aspects of basketball, the sky was pitch-black. Though the lights were on, visibility became poor if we strayed away from the court a little.

“I... I can’t go on anymore.” Completely drained, Mei flopped onto a bench.

He really gave it his all for someone who doesn’t normally exercise. “You’re going to be sore tomorrow, huh?”

“Natsuki, how are you still so full of energy?”

“Because I exercise. It’s good for you. Working out enriches the world.”

“What? That sounds scary somehow...”

Now that Mei was down for the count, I practiced on my own. I needed to regain my feel for the ball before the competition. I wasn’t good enough to beat the upperclassmen with my current skill level.

I gently dribbled the ball and then took a shot. My fingers were slightly off; the ball hit the hoop and bounced off.

“A little higher?” I muttered, then sighed and ran after it.

I looked up ahead to see someone else pick up the rolling ball. A girl wearing the same school’s uniform as me stepped out of the darkness—it was Motomiya Miori.

“What are you doing in a place like this?” She dribbled the ball, which appeared to stick to her hand, and then spun it on her finger.

“We’re practicing for the ball game competition,” I said.

“I expected that from you, but Shinohara-kun too?”

“He wants to show Funayama-san his cool side.”

“He kinda resembles you. Your motives for working hard are childish.” Miori giggled.

Quiet, you! Though I agree we resemble each other. “What about you? This park isn’t on your way home.”

“Mmm... I was in the mood for a little stroll. And then I spotted you.”

She pretended to be the same as usual, but I was certain it was just a front. Something had clearly happened. I could tell just by the timbre of her voice. But she didn’t say anything, so I hesitated about whether I should bring it up.

“Hey, Natsuki.” Miori stood in the center of the court and passed the ball to me. “I’ll keep you company while you train,” she said, taking a defensive stance.

I got it. If you won’t say anything, then I won’t ask. “One-on-one, first to three points.”

"M'kay, that's my second win," I said.

"Th-That wasn't fair! I didn't give the starting signal! Redo!" Miori exclaimed.

"Nice, that was perfect. No complaints this time, yeah?"

"Grrr... Rematch! One more game, come on!"

"Fine, guess I have to..."

"Gah! You've gotta be kidding me. That was just a fluke!" I exclaimed.

"A win's a win, even if it was only a fluke. Sucks to suck, you sore loser!" Miori jeered.

"You've lost every other game. Why're you bragging about one win...?"

I bought water from the vending machine and gulped it down. "Phew! I feel alive again," I said. I was absolutely bushed and couldn't move another muscle.

We were only supposed to play one first-to-three game, but Miori kept whining when she lost... I'm beat. What time is it? I checked my phone; it was already 10 p.m., way too late. If I took the train now, it'd be past eleven by the time I got home.

For the record, Mei was exhausted and had gone home a long time ago. He'd waited for us at first, but our games had gone on endlessly, and he had become tired of watching. *I feel bad for neglecting him.*

I carried the drinks I'd bought from the vending machine back to where Miori was. She'd thrown herself down on the grass in the park. *Sure, we're the only ones out here this late at night, but what the heck are you doing?*

"You're going to get your uniform dirty," I said.

"Too late for that. It's Friday, anyway. I just need to wash it this weekend," she said.

"I brought some drinks."

“What’d you buy?”

“Strawberry orange juice. It’s your favorite, right?”

“I’d like to say, ‘Nice job,’ but I just want to drink water right now.”

“I knew you’d say that, so I also got water.”

“Huh, dang, nice job! You’ve really grown up.” Miori sat up, and I handed her a bottle.

“I drank some of it already, though,” I added.

“Pfft! Hey! Y-You...” It looked like some water had gone down the wrong pipe, because she coughed violently.

“You’re not one to care about that stuff, anyway.” I laughed at the dumb look on her face and sat down beside her.

“That was back when we were kids. It’s different now! Um... There are gender differences and whatever, got it?” Her tone was hesitant as she spoke, and her face was red.

Not a sight I see often. But I guess she’s got a point. Things truly aren’t the same as they used to be. Me, Miori, the people around us—everything is different now.

I gazed up at the cloudless night sky. The stars scattered up there were beautiful. “Hey, do you remember the first time we met?” Even now, that was the only moment I could recall clearly.

“Was it something special? I don’t really remember,” she replied.

“Nothing special to you.”

To Miori, that was probably just one minor scene in her typical day-to-day life. But for me, it was a precious memory.

“Hey, whatcha doing? Come play with us!”

It had happened in the spring of our first year of elementary school. When I hadn’t fit into any friend groups, Miori had taken my hand. And through her, I’d made good friends.

“I wonder what Takuro’s up to now,” I said, recalling an old buddy who’d

been in the same friend group as me and Miori.

“That’s a name I haven’t heard in a while. He was a funny guy.”

Back when I’d known him, Takuro was a bit chubby and lost his temper easily, but he was a merry boy who was constantly smiling.

“After he moved to Osaka, that was it from him. We didn’t have a way to stay in touch back then,” I said.

“Huh, when was that? Fifth grade? Sixth?” Miori asked.

“Fifth grade. He was already gone by the time of our school trip.”

“Oh yeah. It was just me, you...and Shuto by then.”

“Ah, Shuto. He went to a different middle school from us, and then we stopped talking.”

That was another nostalgic name. No word would’ve been more fitting than “idiot” to describe that guy. Shuto was a boy with boundless cheer, always brimming with energy.

“I figured that’s what happened,” she said. “I used to meet up with him every once in a while. Now we stay connected through Minsta. I see him post from time to time. He’s still playing soccer at Higashi High.”

“Really? I’m glad he’s doing well.”

Back then, Miori, Shuto, Takuro, and I had been a crew of four.

“We’re going to hold a contest to decide who’s the best rock skipper around! Let’s sprint to the river!” Miori had declared.

“Awww yeah! I’m not gonna lose! Raaagh! I’m gonna get there fiiirst!” Shuto exclaimed.

“This is so random, why?” I’d grumbled. *“Miori and Shuto are too hyper. I can’t keep up.”*

“Ha ha ha! They’re free-spirited as always! C’mon, Natsuki, let’s get going too!”

It didn’t matter that there were three boys in our group, Miori had always been our leader.

I recalled all the things we'd done together. We'd pranked our teacher and received a huge scolding; Miori had been too skilled at hide-and-seek, and we'd searched for her to no avail until nightfall; we'd sneaked into the school after dark. Once, we'd even tried to bike to Tokyo, gotten discouraged around Saitama, and then turned back. All four of us had been out of action the next day due to sore muscles.

We'd been stupid back then—so much so that just remembering it made me feel embarrassed.

"It was fun," Miori murmured. She was likely reminiscing over the same sort of memories I was.

We were a hopeless bunch back then, but still we'd had a great time.

"I used to think that the four of us would always be together," she continued.

"Same here. I thought there was no way I'd hang out with anyone besides you guys," I said.

Nevertheless, the flow of time was cruel—nothing could stay the same forever. Takuro and Shuto were both walking their own paths in life. It was miraculous that Miori and I were still connected right now. After all, in our original history, we'd stopped interacting completely by this point.

And in much the same way, my current group of six would also change with the flow of time. The place I'd once felt oh so comfy in was now a little suffocating.

"I want to return to those days," Miori said. "Because it was fun, and I was worry-free back then."

"Are you worried about something? You're dating Reita now, so wasn't your wish granted?" I asked.

"I've got a bunch on my mind. We're not adults yet, but we can't stay kids forever. Life's not all about simple emotions like being happy or sad." She looked at me. "Isn't it the same for you?"

"What makes you think that?"

"You're finally dating Hikari-chan, but you look so down."

Nothing gets past Miori. I'd only been running full speed ahead, all so I wouldn't have any regrets this time around. The "now" that I lived in was one that I'd changed—and that's why I had no right to complain.

"Do you...regret the path you chose?" she asked.

I shook my head. *There were other ways I could've handled this. I'm sure I could've fulfilled my desires without letting rifts form in my friendships. However, even knowing that, I still chose this path. It was the sincerest option for me, so no matter how this turns out, I won't regret it.*

"I see," Miori said.

That's really how it is...right? Is this feeling really not regret? I wasn't sure, even though I'd supposedly obtained the things I'd wanted.

"But y'know, you don't need to give up." She suddenly sat up and pointed at my nose. "I bet you're thinking something like, 'I don't have the right to do anything, since it's my fault that things are awkward with our friend group.' Your sincerity is one of your good points, though. I'll give you that."

"Well, it *is* actually my fault. I manipulated them all."

"Sure, but you're not gonna reach your ideal youth at this rate, right?"

"Yeah, probably not..."

Miori started drinking my strawberry orange juice without asking—even though she'd also drank the water.

"Hey, pick one," I said in protest.

"Too bad, both of them are mine!"

Seeing her drink the juice with such relish made my anger fade away.

"I think it's fine for you to be more selfish like me," she said. Her words permeated into my chest. "You don't want to have any regrets, right?"

She's right. Didn't I want to redo my high school life because I was full of regrets? I should prioritize achieving my rainbow-colored youth above everything else.

"Welp, it's weird to hear that from me when I'm full of regrets," she said.

A hush fell between us for a while. We sat side by side, gazing up at the night sky in silence.

“Can I ask what happened?” I said eventually.

“You’re the only person I won’t tell. But I’ll have you know, it’s your fault.”

“What?!” It’s my fault?! That makes me even more anxious! But Miori doesn’t seem like she’s going to talk. What the heck is bothering her?”

“We’d better head home now,” she said.

“Yeah. Any later and we’ll miss the last train.”

“But I’m too tired to stand up.” Despite her words, she rose to her feet.

“Huh?”

Her legs were numb, and she staggered all of a sudden. Before she fell over, I managed to catch her in my arms.

“S-Sorry,” she stuttered. “My legs won’t listen to me.”

Well, unlike me, she played a series of one-on-ones on top of her team’s practice regimen. No wonder her legs are at their limit. “I told you we should’ve stopped sooner.”

“No way, I’d hate that. I can’t end on a loss.”

“You’re still the sore loser I remember.” I smiled wryly and let go of her when she’d regained her balance. “Uh, Miori?”

She didn’t move away and continued to cling to me without a word. I couldn’t see her expression because she pressed her forehead against my chest.

“Is something wrong?” I asked, tapping the back of her head.

“Hey, Natsuki,” she began in a meek voice. What came next was outrageous.

“What would you do...if I told you I love you?”

It was so unexpected that my mind went blank. *What would I do? Wait, Miori...likes me? Then what about Reita?* I froze.



Miori peeled away from me and laughed raucously. “Why’re you taking that so seriously? It was obviously a joke!”

“Shut up! Joke or not, what was I supposed to say there?!” *And that really didn’t feel like a joke. Stop using your stupidly good acting skills for dumb pranks!*

“I’m going home! If we don’t hurry, we’ll miss the last train!” she exclaimed, breaking into a run. She put some distance between us and then beckoned to me.

“Her legs are completely fine,” I muttered. There was nothing else to do but chase after Miori.

The next day, my muscles were sore; getting up from bed was a struggle. Though it was the weekend, I couldn’t take it easy and sleep in. Hikari was coming over later, so I needed to get ready. That’s right—today was our at-home date!

“Natsuki? Your girlfriend is visiting, right? Make sure to clean your room,” my mom said.

“I know already. I’m gonna start cleaning now,” I replied.

“That’s what you always say. Now, you listen to me...” she grumbled, unleashing a stream of complaints.

I only half listened as I began tidying my room. I cleaned regularly, so it was already quite orderly, but I wanted to go the extra mile. For the record, Namika was out with her friends today, but my mom would be home.

“I can’t wait to meet her! It wasn’t long ago that I thought you’d never get a girlfriend,” my mom said blithely as she vacuumed the living room.

“Frankly, I wish you’d go out somewhere,” I told her.

“I’ll just take a quick peek, then I’ll go buy groceries.”

Hearing that brought me relief. *I was worried about how to handle her if she dropped in at every opportunity.*

“Oh! Would it be better to have some snacks prepared? But we just ran out...” Mom paced around the room.

Can you not be more nervous than me?

“All right, this should be good,” I said after making my room spotless. I wiped the sweat off my forehead. Right then, my phone vibrated—I’d received a RINE notification.

Hoshimiya Hikari: Almost at the station!

Natsuki: ‘Kay, I’ll pick you up. Wait there

I left my house and walked to the train station. The vibrant trees lining the road were beautiful. A ginkgo leaf fluttered in the air; fallen leaves gathered along the path’s edge.

I strolled down the familiar country road that cars seldom frequented and reached my destination in five minutes. Hikari spotted me from the unmanned entryway and waved. Her expression lit up instantly.

The look on her face when she finds me is plain unfair. Obviously, it’s adorable as heck! Argh, my girlfriend is too darn cute.

“Hi! Natsuki-kun!” Hikari rushed over to me and grabbed my hand.

“Hweh.” It was so out of left field that a disgusting noise slipped out of my throat. *Please don’t pull out all the stops from the get-go!*

She giggled. “What was that sound supposed to be?”

“I’m sorry I’m creepy.”

“No, you’re not. Natsuki-kun,” she said, “you’re cool as always.”

Whoa, what?! Don’t overstimulate me! Someone’s gonna die! And the victim will be me. “O-Onwards we go!”

“Ah! You’re embarrassed! How cute!”

Th-This girl... How dare you tease me! Am I cool, or am I cute? Pick one! I hope I’m cool!

“It’s my second time here, huh?” Hikari remarked.

We left the station and headed to my house. It was the same mundane scenery from moments ago, but this time, I was with Hikari. That was all it took to make the world appear more vivid.

“Yeah, your first time was over summer break,” I said.

It was a story from almost three months ago now. Hikari had come here for my help after fighting with her father and running away from home. It felt like it had just happened yesterday, but time had flown by.

“I’m sorry about all that—for barging in out of the blue,” Hikari said.

“It’s fine. I’m happy you relied on me,” I assured her. *Because you depended on me, I came to know the real Hoshimiya Hikari. I was already in love with you, but I fell for you even harder.*

“Natsuki-kun, it’s all thanks to you that I’m this happy now.”

“I just lent you a little hand. It’s all the fruits of your own labor.”

She suddenly fell silent.

“Hikari?” I glanced over at her. Her head was facing down for some reason, and she bopped my shoulder with her forehead. Recently, I’d come to understand what she was thinking when she resorted to violence. “Are you...embarrassed?”

“Shush! I don’t want to hear that from Mr. High School Debutant.” Hikari glared at me reproachfully, her cheeks scarlet and puffed up.

“Uh, huh? Uncalled for! That’s rich coming from Miss Self-Proclaimed School Idol,” I retorted without thinking. Hikari wordlessly karate chopped me over and over. *That kinda hurts!* “Violent heroines aren’t popular nowadays, you know.”

“Still, I won’t give up,” she said.

Sure, you don’t need to give up, but can you stop bringing that behavior into reality?

“Hey, Natsuki-kun, are your old schools nearby?” she suddenly asked as she glanced around the neighborhood.

"If we walk about ten minutes that way, we'll hit my middle school. My elementary school is around there too."

"Can we stop by real quick? I'm curious about the places you grew up in."

"They're just backwater schools, nothing interesting to see," I warned her.

But Hikari was determined. "That's fine. I still want to go."

We continued down the road for a while until the school in the center of the residential area came into sight. "Here we are. This is my middle school," I said. *Man, haven't been back here in a long time. There are a bunch of buildings I've never seen before.*

"Is it under construction?" Hikari questioned.

"Come to think of it, I heard something about a new school building."

"Then, is that old building your former school?"

"Yeah, that's where I studied."

"Wow. I see. So this is where you went..." She stared at the unremarkable old building and its surroundings. The baseball and soccer teams were practicing on the field. While we ambled around the school grounds, she asked, "What were you like in middle school?"

"I didn't have any friends. I was just an insignificant loner," I answered. Consequently, I had no stories I could tell her. I truly had nothing. I'd concluded my middle school days all alone.

"But you had friends in elementary school, right? Since you and Miori-chan are childhood friends."

"Yeah. Besides Miori, I had two other close friends. The four of us were always together."

"Then... Can I ask how you ended up a loner if you had them?" Hikari asked, taking a peek at my countenance.

"One changed schools, another moved away, and then we just stopped hanging out. To seal the deal, Miori and I got into a fight. It felt like our friendship was over after that. And I didn't have any other friends either."

“The two of you fought? Why?”

“It was my fault. I pushed her away.” I’d hurt Miori because of nasty emotions like my stupid jealousy. In all honesty, I didn’t want to delve too deeply into that story.

Hikari seemed to pick up on my feelings and only said, “I see.”

“In the end, I couldn’t make a single friend in middle school,” I said. “I regretted it, so I wanted to start high school with a fresh slate—I wanted to change myself and spend my days having fun.”

As we chatted about my past, we continued on until we’d arrived in front of my elementary school. Nothing had changed here, not the worn-out school building or the disproportionately spacious schoolyard.

“Tell me about your time in elementary school. I’m curious what you and Miori-chan were like when you were little. You called her ‘brat commander’ before, right?” Hikari said.

“Yeah. I can tell you all about those days. It may be hard to believe since you only know what Miori’s like now, but back then, she’d barrel along doing whatever she pleased. Really...”

I selected a few amusing stories from my elementary school days, and Hikari listened with delight, laughing loudly. All of them were just tales of me getting dragged around by Miori, though.

We passed by a park near the elementary school; the four of us had played there often. Hikari went in and sat down on a bench. Some children were playing on the jungle gym and swings. *Reminds me of the old days.*

“Natsuki-kun, between now and elementary school, which do you think is more fun?” Hikari asked.

I couldn’t reply immediately.

“Sorry,” she said after a beat. “That was a weird question. Those aren’t the kind of things you can compare.”

“Oh no, it’s nothing to apologize for,” I said. *Which do I prefer? I really don’t know.*

My time as an elementary schooler was already in the far distant past for me. It was highly likely that only memories of the good times remained. Or perhaps those memories had even been glorified.

“We were little kids back then. Unlike now, we were worry-free, and studying wasn’t backbreaking. That’s why it was so fun,” I said. “Still, I enjoy the present more. I pulled off my high school debut, became friends with you guys, and now you’re here by my side. I got to perform in a band like I’ve always wanted, and all my hard work is paying off.” *And that’s precisely why I want these fun times to continue. Miori told me not to give up, so I’ve decided to keep struggling.*

“Natsuki-kun, are you worried...about Uta-chan and Tatsuya-kun?” Hikari asked.

I nodded. “If possible, I want our relationships to go back to how they used to be.”

“Uta-chan said the same thing. She wants to be friends again. But she can’t let go of her feelings yet, so she needs a little more time. She apologized...even though it’s nothing to be sorry for,” Hikari said. “I think we’ll have to wait for Uta-chan to sort out her feelings. After all, that’s what she said—she’s going to take her affections for you and her jealousy towards me, and jam all those feelings into basketball.”

“You two talked about that? I had no idea.” *Well, Uta and Hikari are close friends. Of course she’d talk to Hikari more than me.*

“Uta-chan is strong. Way, way stronger than me.” Hikari squeezed my hand as if she were suppressing indescribable emotions. “I don’t know what’s going through Tatsuya-kun’s head, though. It sort of feels like he’s distancing himself from you, right?”

“So it looks that way to you too?”

“Did something happen?”

“We got into an argument of sorts. It was my fault.” I explained what had happened during the school festival to Hikari.

“I had no idea,” she said.

“Well, it’s fine for him to distance himself from me because of that. No, it’s not fine, but the blame’s on me, so what can I do? It’s just, the thing that bothers me the most is...” I recalled how unsettled I’d felt about Tatsuya’s recent behavior. “He seems like... Lately, doesn’t he seem like he’s not having any fun?”

Hikari blinked at me. “Yeah, now that you mention it... It crossed my mind that he’s been more diligent lately, and he’s studying really hard too. But he smiles a lot less than he used to.”

It was just as she’d said. Nagiura Tatsuya was bright, cheerful, loud, and always smiling—he was a man who openly expressed his emotions. And yet, nowadays, he was constantly swathed in a pensive atmosphere. He was definitely taking his studies and basketball much more seriously than before. But could that change truly be called growth?

“I don’t really like the way he is right now,” I admitted. *I have an inkling of what’s driving him. I may be thickheaded, and my worldview is narrower than others’, but I’ll strive to avoid repeating the same mistakes.*

“So what’ll you do?”

“I’m gonna bring the old Tatsuya back.”

I suddenly remembered how he’d distanced himself from us around the end of spring. *He was jealous of me back then. But things are different this time. Now, he’s trying to move forward. However, the way he’s going about it is wrong. In that case, what are friends for if not to stop each other?*

“Look at that! You’ve already decided what to do?”

“I’d been stewing over this until yesterday, but I finally made up my mind.” *Because Miori gave me the push I needed. It’s stupid to hang my head. In a nutshell, the only thing I can do is look forward and run.*

“Because...of Miori-chan, right?”

“How’d you know?”

“No special reason. I just thought, ‘Gosh, that’s gotta be what happened,’” Hikari said in an exasperated tone, staring up at the sky. “All right!” She

energetically hopped to her feet. “That was a satisfying walk. Let’s get going!”

I took her outstretched hand and stood up from the bench too.

We reached my house, and I led Hikari up to my room. For today, I’d laid out a rug, placed cushions down on top, and set up my collapsible table that I normally kept stored away. I sat down, and she took her seat across the table, facing me.

“It feels comfier in here now,” she remarked.

“You showed up too suddenly last time, but this time I’m fully prepared. Oh, I’ll get us some drinks.” I was about to stand back up, but then a knock came at the door.

“Natsuki, I brought some drinks and snacks. Can I open the door?” Mom opened it before I could answer.

Why’d you even ask? She placed a tray with drinks and snacks on the table.

Hikari gave her a small bow. “Um, thank you for having me over.”

“Aw, it’s nothing! You’re Hoshimiya Hikari-chan, right? Goodness, you’re even cuter than your picture! I can’t believe my little boy has found himself such an adorable girlfriend,” my mom gushed. “Oh, I’m Natsuki’s mother, by the way. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Y-Yes. I’m Hoshimiya Hikari.” Hikari looked confused, unable to keep up with my mom’s nonstop bombardment.

“My son’s got nothing going for him, but please don’t dump him. He’s actually been working hard as of recently!”

“We got it already, so go away.” I pushed my mom, forcing her outside my room. *Once she starts blabbing, she never stops! If I don’t cut in and drive her out, she’ll never leave us alone, no matter how much time passes.*

“Oh my, I must’ve been interrupting. Well, mom here is going to go shopping now, okay? Please make yourself at home. I’ll be back around dinnertime,” she said overeagerly and then left.

The storm's finally passed... Just as I thought that, my mom beckoned me outside my room.

"What now?" I asked.

"Don't let such a lovely girl get away. You'll never catch her twice," she warned.

"I *know*. You don't have to tell me that."

"Also, you're still only high school students, so you'd better not do anything that you won't be able to take responsibility for."

"Huh? Wait, we're not going to—"

My mom left without letting me finish my rebuttal. When I returned to my room, Hikari's cheeks were flushed scarlet, and she was making an awkward expression. *Mom... You were trying to be secretive, but your voice was too loud.*

"Oh, your guitar is here." Perhaps searching for a topic, or purely out of genuine interest, Hikari turned her gaze to the corner of my room where my guitar hung on its stand. "Will you play me something if I ask you to?"

I-It's heeere! The ultimate conundrum that every guitarist goes through: what am I—a novice—supposed to play when someone makes a request? I can't believe the day is finally here... But I've already come up with the correct answer!

"Okay!" I replied with a smug grin. When I had first picked up the guitar, I'd fantasized about this exact situation many times. I had even practiced for this very moment. I connected it to my mini-amp for home use, tweaked its settings, and tuned up.

That was enough to make Hikari applaud. "Ohhh! Very cool!"

"I haven't even played anything yet," I said.

"But you look so cool when you're holding a guitar!"

"Thanks. I'll play something short," I said, and then began strumming the strings with a pick.

Using alternate picking, I strummed out a heartfelt and rhythmical melody of

sixteenth notes—Aerosmith’s “Walk This Way.” After I’d spent years mulling over the “What do I play when someone asks?” dilemma, this was my conclusion. It was the coolest song to throw out.

I finished at a convenient spot and sneaked a peek at Hikari’s face.

“O-Oooh.” She seemed to be at a loss as she clapped.

H-Huh? That’s weird... According to my estimations, she should be cheering loudly. “H-How was it?”

“Ummm... You were cool, but I guess I didn’t really know it?” She forced an unsure-sounding laugh.

Th-The answer that took me years of rumination! No, I had a feeling this would happen. She’s a music casual, after all. I should’ve played something from a more recent popular song rather than an oldie. I just believed that this riff would reach people of all ages and places.

“But I think I might’ve heard it before?” she added.

“Y-Yeah, right? It’s old but it’s a super famous classic.” I gave her the rundown on Aerosmith. Hikari followed along, commenting in a way that made it easy for me to talk. *She’s probably not very interested... My girlfriend is so kind!*

“I want to hear other songs too. What about the ones you played at the school festival?”

At her request, I played the songs we’d performed at the concert, as well as ones she liked. I wasn’t a great entertainer by any means, but she looked over the moon.

“Thanks, Natsuki-kun!”

After that, we watched YouTube videos together, read and discussed Hikari’s latest manuscript, played some DVDs of my favorite bands performing live, and all in all spent our time peacefully. The relaxed atmosphere was very comfy.

“Huh? It’s evening already,” Hikari said.

I looked out the window; the sky had been dyed crimson before I knew it. Now that we’d done pretty much everything we wanted to, our chatter died down. However, it didn’t feel awkward.

The cozy silence was suddenly broken by Hikari; she patted the floor next to where she sat. "Come here."

I moved my cushion from across the table beside her. She gently placed her head on my shoulder. Thrown into turmoil by what was happening, I stiffened. Hikari stayed there, putting her weight on me. It felt like we were about to fall over so, flustered, I wrapped my arm around her waist to hold her up.

"Eh heh heh... My plan was a success!" Her blissful voice rose up from my chest. She placed her arm around me as well and squeezed me tightly.

"D-Don't you think this is too sudden?" I questioned.

"I figured you wouldn't hug me if I didn't do this." She pressed her body into me even more. Her cuteness was boundless, there were all sorts of soft sensations on me, and she smelled kinda nice—if we stayed like this, I didn't know what I would do next.

Ah, forget it! Whatever happens, happens! I tightened my embrace. "I'm sorry I'm such a wimp."

"It's fine. I can tell you cherish me," she said.

I never initiate anything. Hikari's always the one encouraging me to be brave. It's pretty pathetic, but I'll just need to work hard going forward. Right now, I'll savor this happy moment. The evening sun shone through the window, faintly illuminating Hikari in my arms.

"Say," she began. "Natsuki-kun?"

"Yeah?"

She burrowed her face into my chest before speaking. "I... I might be a little more lewd...than other girls."

Huh? What did she just say? I couldn't even reply. I only froze, trying to process this outrageous information.

Hikari turned bright red all the way up to her ears, embarrassed by her admission.

"Really?" I barely managed to utter.

She nodded. “Because...when we’re like this, I want to touch you more,” she said slowly.

The beast called “instinct” is roaring inside of my heart! And the chains called “reason” that have been restraining it until now are creaking loudly! “Hikari...”

“Natsuki-kun...” Her expression spellbound, she raised her face. Our gazes locked. I couldn’t take my eyes off of her. We leaned towards each other, closing the distance between—

“Onii-chan! I heard Hoshimiya-senpai is over! Is that...true?” The door flew open, and Namika energetically barged in.

For a few seconds, there was a void. Everybody needed time to digest the situation. For some reason, I was strangely calm. Namika’s sudden appearance had snapped me back to reality.

All things aside, this is a very bad picture. Not gonna lie, no matter how you look at us, Hikari and I look like we’re about to...you know.

Namika’s face flushed red in the blink of an eye.

“U-Um! Namika-chan! Well, it’s not what you think...!” Hikari said.

In one cranny of my calm (not that it helped) mind, thoughts like *You sure it’s not?* floated around.



“S-Sorryyy! Pardon the intrusion!” Namika slammed the door shut. We could hear her rapidly stomp down the stairs.

Wearing a mortified expression, Hikari pulled away from me and straightened out her clothes and hair. In all honesty, I felt conflicted—the beast of instinct had been about to run wild, so I was actually relieved Namika had interrupted, but at the same time, I felt disappointed.

“Um, Natsuki-kun... You’d better give her a proper explanation, okay? It wasn’t what it looked like. We weren’t going to do that sort of thing; it was just—you know—just that,” Hikari said incoherently.

I had no idea what she was going for, but I nodded along. Even if she hadn’t told me to, I’d been planning to give Namika a harsh lesson later.

Knock before you enter someone else’s room. Okay?

After a fun weekend, another ordinary week began. It was the day before the ball game competition, which made the atmosphere during our regular classes somewhat restless. Whispers about the big day floated around everywhere; it seemed like everyone was looking forward to it. However, Tatsuya, who would’ve normally taken the wheel in those kinds of conversations, was reticent.

During math class, Murakami-sensei pulled out our answer sheets for the quiz we’d taken last time. “I’m announcing the results of the quiz. This time, we had a rare perfect score.”

Murakami-sensei routinely gave us quizzes, but they were considerably more difficult compared to our exams, so even I’d never gotten a perfect score on one before. *I wonder who got a hundred points?*

“Come pick it up in the order I call you,” Murakami-sensei said. “Nagiura Tatsuya. You’ve really been hitting the books lately.”

“Whaaat?!” Shocked cries filled the classroom.

Tatsuya didn’t look particularly proud of himself; instead, he looked listless as he retrieved his answer sheet.

“T-Tatsu?! What happened to you?!” Uta exclaimed.

He didn’t react much to her astonishment and simply replied, “Uh, nothing much. I’ve just been studying.”

We were then called up in order of our scores. The second to be called was me, with ninety-two points. Once everyone got their papers back, Murakami-sensei looked around the entire class.

“All of you should take a leaf out of Nagiura’s book and put more effort into your studies. That daily effort leads to better grades.” Murakami-sensei wrapped up the class with that, and then the end-of-period bell rang.

Immediately, Uta and Hikari beelined for Tatsuya’s seat.

“Hey, Tatsu! What happened to our ‘Lamebrain Alliance’?!” Uta exclaimed.

“Yeah! Was the steadfast bond the three of us shared just a hoax?!” Hikari chimed in.

I joined them over there as well. *“Lamebrain Alliance”? What the heck is that? Did the three of them really form that sort of alliance?*

“I don’t remember ever joining a nonsensical alliance like that,” Tatsuya said, strongly denying their coalition.

Yeah, that’s right. It’s quite nonsensical.

“N-No waaay,” Uta cried. “We’ve been betrayed! Hikariiiiin!”

“We’ve been had, Uta-chan. Unforgivable! Don’t worry—I’ll never betray you,” Hikari said.

They inexplicably began consoling each other. Nanase observed them, eyes filled with exasperation.

While the two girls made a fuss around Tatsuya, I whispered to Nanase, “Are Hikari’s grades really that bad? Wasn’t she around average?”

“She’s fallen to Uta’s level as of late. Probably because she’s been too preoccupied by her novel—and you,” Nanase replied.

“Are you possibly insinuating that it’s my fault?”

“It’s half your fault. Make sure she studies,” she said frigidly.

Y-Yes... Sorry, mom...

“At any rate,” she continued, “Nagiura-kun ranked around sixtieth on our previous midterm exam. He didn’t bring it up, though.”

Sixtieth? There are two hundred and fifty students in our year, so he pretty much made the top cut. Considering how he was practically last in the first semester, his improvement is beyond exceptional! “How come you know about it, then?”

“Don’t you know? Nagiura-kun and I are quite close. I tutor him every now and then.”

Oh, really? That’s sorta unexpected. It’s nothing out of the norm, but it’s really hitting me how other people’s relationships change even when I’m not around.

Tatsuya looked over at Nanase and me. “What’re you two whispering about?” he asked suspiciously.

“We’re complimenting you. It’s impressive that you got a hundred points,” I said.

“It was just a quiz. I’m not gonna ace the actual exams.” Tatsuya snorted. He wasn’t trying to conceal any embarrassment; he earnestly believed that.

“Did you go through an attitude change?” Hikari asked.

Tatsuya scratched his head and gazed out the window with a faraway look. “Well... Something like that. I just wanted to give both school and basketball my all.” He stood up and said, “Gonna run to the bathroom.”

Before he could walk out, Uta grabbed the hem of his uniform. Having made some sort of decision, she asked, “Tatsu, have you been feeling down these days?”

“You think so?” he replied.

“You’d normally be more pumped! C’mon, you got a *perfect* score!”

“Yeah, maybe you’re right. I might’ve reacted that way before. But it’s not like I’m not happy about it,” he said dispassionately. Without so much as a pause, he said, “Aight, bathroom for real this time,” and left.

Uta watched him go, displeasure written all over her face. Hikari and Nanase exchanged looks.

Reita joined up with the rest of us. "It's great that he's working so hard, but he's not acting like himself."

"Did something happen?" Uta wondered, tilting her head to the side.

Nanase looked conflicted as she watched Uta. "It's not my place to say," I overheard her mutter.

"Natsuki, can I have a sec?" Reita beckoned me over to the balcony. There was a gentle breeze outside. He leaned his elbows against the railing and looked out towards the school grounds. "Natsuki, you've also realized by now, right? The reason Tatsuya's working so hard, I mean."

"Yeah, I've got a guess," I said after a beat.

Tatsuya said that he could entrust Uta to me, but I turned her down. If I'm not gonna grant her wish, then he wants to be the one to bring her happiness. So since she fell for me, he's trying to become someone more outstanding than me... He's probably thinking something along those lines.

"Tatsuya's not particularly emotive anymore because his goals are lofty. He's acting like this because he's constantly thinking, 'This isn't anywhere near enough.' He's still easy to understand," Reita explained.

"It's good that he's working so hard, but it'll wear him out if he keeps that mentality up," I said.

"Yeah. And more importantly, he's not the Tatsuya we've grown so fond of. He's boring right now," Reita bluntly said. From the side, I thought he looked a little angry. "So let's go get the old Tatsuya back." He raised his fist.

I bumped my fist against his. "Yeah! Let's remind him how fun it is to be a bunch of dumbasses with us."

Reita and I both have our own personal reasons for doing this. Even if Tatsuya's become this way because he's matured, it's not any fun for us. He's always spouting dumb shit; he's loud, short-tempered, kinda pushy, and yet he's got his sensitive and tricky-to-deal-with sides too. But we like him that way.

That's the guy we're friends with.

And that's why...we're gonna bring him back!

That day after school, we had our third executive committee meeting. All we had left were final checks of the schedule and advance prep, so we finished quickly. Then at last, tomorrow would be the day of the ball game competition. As a committee member, my duties would include refereeing, coordinating the schedule, organizing the classes, and so on.

"Natsuki, can we practice some more today?" Mei asked as the four of us first-years walked down the hallway.

"Oh, you down? I planned on training today anyway. Tomorrow's the big day, after all," I replied.

Unexpectedly, Miori chimed in. "Guess I'll tag along, then. I've got nothing else to do anyway."

"No practice?" I questioned.

"We're off today. We get a break once every two weeks."

"Should you be using your day off for more basketball?"

"This time, I'm gonna prove that I'm superior to you."

"That's some pointless effort. Kudos," I said with a shrug.

Miori glared at me. "What'd you say?"

"Pardon me, may I sit in as well?" Funayama-san asked. "I won't be very helpful since I'm not participating in the basketball event, but I'd like to watch you all practice." She didn't explicitly say so, but everyone knew she probably just wanted to spend more time with Mei.

"Sure you can. Right, Mei?" I said.

"O-Of course!" He vigorously nodded his head over and over.

Simmer down, there. "Cool, let's head over together."

Today, we practiced at the city gym's court. It was cheap for personal use, and

there wouldn't be a lot of people on a weekday night. We walked past the station and arrived there. As expected, no one else was around.

We changed into our gym shoes before stepping onto the floor. Mei had the ball we'd bought last time, but the gym had more available for people to borrow. One ball wasn't enough for a good training session, so we snagged a second.

"You're playing basketball tomorrow, right? How're you feeling?" Miori asked.

"I'm feeling good. I've been training on my own," I replied. Including the time I practiced with Mei and Miori in the park, I'd put myself through three sessions total. I'd also spent gym classes playing basketball, so I had regained most of my touch.

"You're taking this pretty seriously," she remarked.

"Yeah. Though, I know there's the crowd who'd say it's *only* a ball game competition."

"Hey, giving this your all is very you. I also think it'll be more fun that way." Miori sank a shot neatly through the hoop.

She's good. Her shooting form is sleek as ever.

Meanwhile, on the other half of the court, Mei and Funayama-san were practicing while flirting.

"I-It went in!" he yelled.

"Wow! Nice shot! That was amazing!" she exclaimed. She cheered him on as he kept shooting ball after ball.

"I wasn't sure how they'd work out, but seems like it's smooth sailing for them," I said.

"It's because they've both picked up on each other's feelings. They're definitely going to get together. This was way easier than helping you and Hikari-chan," Miori said matter-of-factly.

I wouldn't expect any less confidence from my super adviser! Well, former adviser.

“Forget about those two; it’s time for our one-on-one.”

“I’m supposed to be giving Mei pointers, though,” I said. “Oh well, I’ll help him later.”

Miori and I played another string of matches. I won about seventy percent of the time.

“Again!” she shouted, irritated by her losses. But right then, the doors opened. “Huh?” Her eyes widened in surprise.

Reita, Okajima-kun, Hino, and Hikari entered the gym.

“Hey, Miori,” Reita said.

“R-Reita-kun? Why’re you here?” she asked.

“Natsuki invited me. He said he wanted to practice together if I still had energy after soccer. I’m in the basketball competition too,” he explained. “I figured I might as well bring Hino and Okajima too.”

“We’re both on the soccer team, after all! If Reita’s coming, then I’m down too!” Okajima-kun flashed his pearly whites and shot us a thumbs-up.

“I had nothing goin’ on today, and the city gym is close to my home.” Hino laughed lightheartedly, shrugging his shoulders.

“I happened to run into them after literature club, so I came for moral support.” Hikari smiled.

What an absolute angel. You’re the cutest girl in the world, as always!

“By the way, where’s Tatsuya?” I asked.

“He went home to study. He said there’s no point in going ham over the ball game competition.” Reita sighed.

“He started acting like a Goody Two-Shoes all of a sudden, that jerk. He even got a hundred on the last quiz,” Okajima-kun growled.

“Isn’t he acting weird lately? Was he always like that?” Hino wondered, cocking his head to the side.

“It’s fine. We can still practice without him,” I said.

With Mei thrown into the mix, we played a three-on-three practice match—me, Mei, and Okajima-kun versus Miori, Reita, and Hino. Funayama-san and Hikari cheered us on as they chatted on the side.

“You’re Funayama-san, right? I’m Hoshimiya Hikari,” she said.

“Th-That’s right,” Funayama-san replied. “I’m surprised you know my name. I’ve been meeting a lot of famous people lately.”

“What? Am I famous?”

“Of course. You’re the school idol.”

Hikari laughed. “Oh, stop it! No, I’m not!”

They look like they’re hitting it off well. I’d expect nothing less from Hikari’s astounding communication skills. “Mei, look around when you try to pass. If you’re not sure where to throw it, give it back to me.”

“O-Okay! I will!” he said. As we practiced in a real match format, he gradually got better on the court.

“You can tell you’ve improved, right? Now you just need to show the fruits of all your training during the actual competition,” I told him.

“D-Do you really think so?”

“You’ll do great. Have some confidence.” I patted him on the back. My words weren’t empty; he really had been putting in a lot of work. *I heard class four also has Kijima-kun, a member of the basketball team, playing in the event. They’re bound to be a tough opponent.*

“But we’re facing your class in the first round,” Mei said.

Right. Sadly, class 1-2 is squaring off against 1-4 first. “That was up to the lottery draw.”

“Ha ha ha... Curse my bad luck...”

We continued our three-on-three, but not for too long.

“Let’s stop here for today,” I said.

“Done already? I can keep going for a long time,” Okajima-kun said.

“We don’t want to be too tired for tomorrow. Let’s listen to Natsuki,” Reita said.

My group aside, Reita and the others joined in after their club activities. Stamina and timewise, we shouldn’t practice for any longer. We’re getting our priorities backwards if we overwork and harm ourselves. “All right, then. I’ll go wash my face.”

When I exited the city gym, it was pitch-black outside. The chilly breeze felt good against my sweaty body. I twisted the faucet, gulped down some water, and rinsed the sweat off my face. “Phew. That’s refreshing.”

After I finished, I returned to where the others were. On my way there, I heard voices from within the darkness. *Is someone at the back entrance?* I impulsively peeked around the corner to see Funayama-san and Miori talking. *What’re they doing over there?*

“Thank you so much for all your help,” Funayama-san said.

“Nah, I didn’t do much. All I did was watch over you,” Miori replied.

“Still, you gave me the courage I needed. Now, all I need to do is confess to him tomorrow.”

“Good luck. I’m sure it’ll go well.”

I could only hear disconnected phrases, but that was what their conversation sounded like. *Miori was helping Funayama-san just like how I was helping Mei, so I guess Funayama-san’s thanking her... Wait, she’s gonna confess to Mei tomorrow? Man, their relationship progressed fast.*

“Pardon me if I’m mistaken, but may I ask a small question?” Funayama-san asked.

“Hmm? Sure, you can ask me anything.”

Funayama-san hesitated, struggling to get the words out. She needed a moment to brace herself before asking, “Miori-san, you love Haibara-kun, right?”

It felt like time had stopped. A gust blew by, and fallen leaves danced in the air.

Huh? No way she does. Funayama-san's assertion was so out of left field that my brain froze. What was even stranger was that Miori remained silent. *She'd normally laugh that sort of comment off...so why isn't she saying anything? That makes it seem like—*

"What would you do...if I told you I love you?"

Miori forced a smile. "Come on, Shizuki-chan. That's a mean joke. Don't you know I'm dating Reita-kun?"

Yeah. Funayama-san's misunderstanding something. Well, people generally get the idea that Miori and I are closer than we actually are.

"Haibaraaa! Are you there?" I heard Hino call.

Whoops, the others are looking for me! I wiped my face with a towel and returned to the gym entrance. They were waiting for me in the lit space there.

"Oh, there he is!"

"Sorry. I was washing my face," I told them. *The other two will probably rejoin us soon.*

"I asked *because* I know that."

"Then don't say any more."

Chapter 3: The Ball Game Competition

It was finally the day of the ball game competition. A considerable number of people were gathered around the gym and school grounds.

Man, look at all the students! The whole school is here, so there's probably a little under eight hundred people. Whoops, no time for being impressed right now. I've got committee work to do.

"Let's see, first up on court one we have class 3-2 against 2-1! Please get ready!" I yelled as loudly as I could.

We needed the matches to follow the schedule closely. Miori and I were in charge of volleyball on court one.

"It's fantastic that the ball game competition is a breath of fresh air from boring school days, but it's still a pain in the butt to be on the committee," Miori grumbled.

"Don't start complaining now. It's not even that hard," I chided.

We had a referee from the volleyball team, so all we were responsible for was flipping the scoreboard during the games, not to mention we were working in shifts. Mei's group would take over after their break.

Miori sighed. "I wonder what Shizuki-chan's crowd is doing."

"They're probably cheering for their classes like everyone else," I said. *I doubt they've got the nerves to publicly flirt in broad daylight.* "Come to think of it, is Funayama-san going to confess to Mei?" I asked, trying to make small talk.

Miori suddenly stopped breathing and froze for a moment. "Did you hear that from her?"

"No, that's what you two were talking about yesterday, right? I happened to catch part of your conversation."

"O-Oh, I see. Just a part of it, right?"

"Yeah. Something wrong?"

“Nope. Nothing wrong with that. Not at all,” she said rigidly. “Stuuupid. Idiot. Moron.”

“Is the name-calling necessary if nothing’s wrong?!”

Miori rested her hand against her chest and heaved a long sigh of relief. “Right. We *were* talking about that. She wants to confess to Shinohara-kun today. Apparently, after getting to know him more through committee work, she’s fallen for him even harder.”

“That’s great. Mei hasn’t worked up the courage yet, so it looks like she’s going to beat him to the punch.”

“Don’t you know girls prefer being confessed to by guys?”

“Well, guys want to be on the confessing side too. Plus, when you know the feeling’s mutual, it’s just a question of courage, so it feels kinda bad if the girl says it first.”

“But you got confessed to by two cute girls—did you feel pressured to reply?”

“I confessed on the big stage because I wanted to change how pathetic I was.” *I normally wouldn’t have done that. If she’d rejected me, it would’ve been a huge stain on my dark history for sure. But that’s exactly why it was a meaningful act.*

After a beat, Miori said, “Natsuki, you’re so cool. I want to be more like you too.”

The second-year acting as the referee blew the whistle, signaling the start of the match between class 3-2 and 2-1.

“You want to be like *me*? Stop joking,” I said.

“You don’t hesitate once you make up your mind. I respect that about you,” she said.

“I can’t believe you’re complimenting me. Is it going to rain today?” I teased.

Miori didn’t retort back—it seemed she’d meant it wholeheartedly.

She’s been acting weird lately. I thought the same when we were practicing in the park, but she’s missing her usual pep.

“Hey, they scored just now,” she said.

“Oh right. My bad.” *I can’t zone out here. Come on, focus on score keeping.*
“They’re pretty pumped up.”

Every time the third-years scored a point, their supporters in the audience exploded into cheers.

“They spend every day studying for college entrance exams, so they’re probably using today to let all their stress out,” Miori surmised as she added another point to the board.

Is that why the third-years’ enthusiasm is on a different level from the other grades? “Well, this is their last event now that the school festival is over.”

“Yeah,” she said in agreement. “They look like they’re having a blast.”

“Miori—”

Anticipating what I was about to say, she stopped me there. “I’m fit as a fiddle. You don’t need to worry about me.”

“But didn’t you say it’s my fault?”

“I was pulling your leg. It’s all on me, so stop agonizing over it.”

She was so firm that I couldn’t say anything back.

“Do your best in your matches today. I’ll be on the sidelines for Reita-kun, so I’ll spare you a few words of support too,” Miori said, preventing me from pushing the topic any further.

After my shift, I reconvened with my class. They were outside where the girls’ soccer matches were taking place. Our first match was against class 2-1. On the field, Uta was putting her small physique to hard work as she moved up with the ball.

“Uta-chan! Yuino-chan! You got this!” Hikari and the others cheered for them loudly from the benches.

Uta adeptly dribbled past multiple defenders.

“Man, Uta’s good,” I remarked.

“Yeah. She plays soccer with us often,” Reita explained.

Uta passed the ball to Nanase. Nanase managed to protect it from the defender and sent it forward. *She’s not as good as Uta, but Nanase’s pretty slick. Then again, her weakness is stamina.*



Tatsuya wordlessly watched the field with his arms crossed. There was a faraway look in his eyes, and he appeared bored.

“Tatsuya, you’re not gonna cheer for them?” I asked.

“Hmm? Oh right. Cheering.” He joined everyone else in their yelling. However, I could tell he was only going through the motions and putting in the bare minimum effort. After all—setting aside whether it was good or bad behavior—Tatsuya would normally be our lead heckler.

“Nice!”

“Uta-chan, you’re awesome!”

Loud cheers rose up from all around me. Uta had squeezed a shot past the other team during a chaotic scuffle in front of the goal. After that, our girls managed to protect that one point until the clock ran out. It was class 1-2’s victory.

“Nice job!” I said as they returned to the bench.

“I’m... I’m too weary to go on.” Pale-faced, Nanase plopped down on the bench.

“A-Are you okay?” Hikari asked.

“I leave the rest to you, Hikari.” Nanase flopped over, her head landing on Hikari’s lap.

“Huh?! Hey, Yuino-chan?!”

Is this a comedy sketch? I held back my laughter and saw Uta, our star player, coming over. “Uta, nice goal!” I raised my hand.

She blinked at me for a split second and then grinned widely. She returned my high five. “Thanks, Natsu!” Her smile was like a sunflower in full bloom.

“Good work making it past the first round,” Reita said.

She nodded energetically. “Yeah! We’re up against third-years next, so we’d better step up our game! Huh? Don’t the boys play a basketball match before that? Didn’t you say the first game’s at eleven?” She tilted her head to the side and looked at me, the committee member.

Our basketball team's first match does indeed start at eleven. "Yeah. We should start getting ready for that."

"We'll come cheer you guys on after we clean up over here!" Uta exclaimed.

"Sounds good. You'd better look forward to it, 'cause we're going to win!" I was overjoyed. It had been a while since Uta and I had shared a normal conversation like this without any discomfort. I hadn't done anything to change that—she had probably found closure.

Once eleven came around, we did a light warm-up before stepping onto the court. Our first opponent was class 1-4.

"Line up!" shouted the referee.

As directed, we took our places at the center line and faced the students of class four. Mei stood across from me, shaking violently.

"Oh no no no no no," he muttered.

"You're way too nervous. Loosen up and take a deep breath," I told him.

He started inhaling rapidly.

"No, not like that. Don't just breathe in. Breathe out. Let it out."

"Haaah, haaah!" he exhaled. "I-I'm sorry."

We were causing quite the scene—the kids from class four smiled wryly at our exchange.

"Sorry, Mei. I'm not gonna go easy on you," I said.

"I know you won't. I wouldn't want to win that way either," he said.

I sneaked a glance at the spectators. Funayama-san's eyes were focused on Mei, and her hands were clasped together as though she were praying.

"My crush is cheering for me. I may not be good at basketball, but I'll give this everything I've got."

Seeing him so determined put a smile on my face. *He's become dependable in the blink of an eye.*

“Natsuki-kun! Good luck!” Hikari yelled from our class bench. I waved back at her.

Our surroundings erupted with shrill screams and teasing jeers. *We’re way too popular.* I scanned the vicinity and spotted Miori on the second floor. Realizing that I’d found her, she put on an exasperated look. Her lips moved, and though I couldn’t hear her, I knew what she’d said.

“Don’t lose, Natsuki.”

Sure thing, Miori. It’ll be just like the old days. If that’s what you want, then I’ll win.

All the players lined up and yelled, “Let’s have a good game!” And then the ref kicked off the match.

The ball flew high above the center circle. Okajima-kun fought for it, but class four won the tip-off and took control of the first play. They passed the ball to pinny number five, Kijima-kun of the basketball team.

Victory comes to those who make the first move. I’ll seize the initiative here. The moment Kijima-kun began to nonchalantly dribble, I kicked off the ground. Keeping my body low, I stretched out my arm and just barely nudged the ball.

“Crap!” he yelled.

I accelerated forward, grasped the ball, and dribbled away. Kijima-kun chased after me. I pushed my way up the court and shifted into a layup. He jumped to block me, but I’d never intended to shoot the ball in the first place. I brought the ball behind my back and let go.

“Nice pass,” said Reita, who had taken off at the same time I did. He caught the ball and shot from right under the hoop.

“Wow!” exclaimed the audience. Our class bench went wild. Uta and Hikari were leaning forward so far that they were about to fall over. *Move back a little! That’s dangerous.*

Kijima-kun clicked his tongue. “Tsk. I let my guard down.” He caught the ball and tried dribbling forward again.

I was in charge of marking him. We had Tatsuya posted on number three,

their tallest player. Kijima-kun brought the ball to the top of the key and looked at me, eyes narrow.

“Tatsuya’s not on me? You guys must underestimate me,” he said and then came at me. He dribbled to the right and then cut back, passing the ball between his legs. He tried to shake me off by rapidly stepping to his left, but I reached my hand out from behind him and jabbed the ball with my fingers.

“What?!” he cried.

Tatsuya scooped up the ball, and I instantly broke into a run. Seeing me move, Tatsuya threw the ball ahead. It bounced once and flew far in front of me. I somehow managed to reach it and straightened out my posture with a dribble before transitioning into a layup. The ball fell through the hoop, making it our second goal.

I was a bit winded after running that hard, so I told off the passer. “Dude, Tatsuya, you put way too much force into that throw,” I said.

“I believed you’d get it,” he replied.

“Well dang, can’t stay upset if you say that.” *Knew it—he’s half-assing this! He’s not blatantly cutting corners, but that’s the feeling I get.*

“My bad, guys! We’re gonna get the next point!” Kijima-kun exclaimed.

Unlike Tatsuya, Kijima-kun was chock-full of competitive spirit. This time, he advanced with a classic drive, but I could react to that. I anticipated where he was heading and blocked him, so he stopped mid step and moved back instead.

“Shinohara!” Kijima-kun passed to their number seven, Mei.

“G-Got it!” Mei practically deflected the ball towards number three, who was standing in the corner.

Considering how he couldn’t pass properly a week ago, he’d really improved a lot. Their number three caught the ball and shot from where he stood. The ball drew an arch in the air, hit the hoop, and bounced back up. Tatsuya decisively grabbed the soaring ball, controlling the rebound.

If Tatsuya was playing seriously, he wouldn’t have even let the guy take a shot. Oh well, it worked out. It’s time for a fast break. I ran forward.

Tatsuya passed the ball to Reita, who sent it to the wing where I was. By the time I caught it, only Kijima-kun had kept up with me. I acted like I was about to throw down against him, but instead tossed the ball up.

Okajima-kun dashed in, snatched the ball, and—though his form was a bit sloppy—took the shot. However, it bounced off the hoop and went straight to our opponent.

“Ugh! Seriously?!” he shouted.

Mei grabbed the ball; evidently he had sprinted as fast as he could back to their side of the court. “Kijima-kun!”

“Nice one, Shinohara!”

Mei passed the ball to Kijima-kun, who then passed it back to Mei. They got past our defense for a counterattack. I ran after them, but I couldn’t catch up. Tatsuya was the only one on our half.

Kijima-kun used Mei as a decoy and passed to their number one. He shot from the corner. However, it bounced off the hoop.

To begin with, it was best to assume that most shots were going to miss in a game between a bunch of amateurs. Rebounds were more important here. It was chaos in front of the goal, but Tatsuya overwhelmed everyone and secured the ball.

The spectators gasped collectively. In terms of both jump strength and power, he was on a whole nother level. *Tatsuya’s an absolute beast.*

“Bring it on, Tatsuya,” Kijima-kun said.

Tatsuya ignored his provocation and threw the ball to Reita, who was on the left wing. Reita passed it to Hino, who subsequently passed it to me. Marking me was number three. He dropped his hips low and spread his arms wide.

Is that your attempt at defense? Sorry, but you’re full of holes. I didn’t need high-level techniques in a real game. Performing basic techniques at a high level would suffice.

Our eyes locked. I looked to my right and simultaneously lurched forward. Number three reacted to my movement and followed me. Once I knew I had

him, I drove the ball in the opposite direction.

Fakes were the simplest technique, and very effective. I easily slipped past number three. Mei came to cover me, but I sidestepped him with a crossover. I faked a shot and passed to Okajima-kun. I'd drawn three defenders to me, so he was unguarded right in front of the hoop. He caught the ball and sank the shot through the ring this time.

"Ohhh!" cheered the crowd.

That should do it.

The moment I relaxed, Kijima-kun threw the ball forward. "Shinoharaaa!"

Crud, I dropped my guard. They're launching a fast break!

Mei beelined straight for our goal.

"Him again!" I exclaimed.

Mei had probably thought long and hard about how he could be useful. Even if he didn't have the techniques down, anyone sprinting like mad on the court was trouble. After all, it allowed his team to go on the offensive in a flash, just like now.

Mei caught the pass, stopped in front of the hoop, and leisurely took a shot. The ball bounced off the backboard and went clean through the net.

"Nice one!" class four called out to Mei.

Though his breathing was ragged, he responded to each of them.

"Nice shot, Shinohara-kun!" Funayama-san shouted. I was surprised she could be so loud.

I looked over her way. She was being teased by all the girls around her, and her face was bright red. Mei beamed with utmost satisfaction and struck a victory pose. *You look pretty cool. But sorry, you're gonna have to lose here.*

We were on offense now. I caught a pass from Reita in the corner of the court. I was up against number three, but Kijima-kun was positioned so he could assist him at any time. It would be hard to get past them, so I didn't try to. I faked to the side, faked a pass, and then leaped straight up. I raised the ball

from my chest up above my head and snapped my wrists, pushing it off with my pointer and middle finger.

“What?!” Kijima-kun gaped, at a loss for words.

I sank a three-pointer through the net without so much as a noise. It was followed by the whistle signaling the end of the first half.

When I returned to the bench, I was met with a warm welcome from my hyped-up class.

“Nice shot, Haibara!”

“Haibara-kun, how the heck are you so good?!”

There were multiple events going on at this time, so about a third of the class was present. But everyone from my usual friend group was here.

“Here you go, Natsuki-kun.” Hikari handed me a water bottle.

I took it from her and quenched my thirst. I flicked my eyes to the scoreboard—we had a devastating lead after the first half. *So far, so good.*

“Hell yeah, let’s gooo! We got this in the bag! Haibara is killing it out there!” Okajima-kun, who was in a euphoric mood, smacked my back.

Dude, that hurts. “Don’t let your guard down. The score’s still close enough that they can turn the tables.”

“Ha ha ha! Yeah, I gooot it! You’re always so serious!”

Tatsuya stood up, his expression blank. “I’m gonna go wash my face.”

We all watched him go, collectively bothered by his strange lack of emotion.

“What’s up with him?” Okajima-kun asked, cocking his head to the side.

“Who knows? Eh, who cares. He’s playing fine,” Hino replied lazily.

After a beat, Uta said, “I’ll check up on him,” and then chased after Tatsuya.

“Let’s go too,” Reita said.

“Yeah. Something about him is bugging me,” I said.

Reita and I followed after the two of them.

Tatsuya washed his face off at the sinks a short walk from the gym. The clamor of students could be heard in the distance. No one was around except for the four of us. Uta kept her eyes on Tatsuya's back. Reita and I hid close by in the shadows with our breaths held.

"Tatsu," Uta tentatively called out to him.

"What's up?" he replied, wiping his face with a towel.

"Why're you being so passive?"

"Rather than a basketball player rampaging on the court, it's better to let the beginners have fun."

"Well, maybe..." Uta was at a loss for words—his reasoning was sound.

"Plus, it's just the ball game competition; it wouldn't be very mature of me to go all out."

That seemed to tick her off. "Who cares about that! Be immature! You never cared about things like that before!"

Tatsuya's eyes widened. He was shocked that she'd snap at him like that. He shook his head. "We can't stay kids forever, so I want to grow up a little."

"So is *this* how you think adults behave? If it is, then I'd rather you stay a kid!" Uta urged, her voice a strained yell. "I don't like the way you are right now. Go back to being the old Tatsu."

It felt like the air froze over. Tatsuya's expression twisted sorrowfully. "I'm a terrible person. That's why I want to better myself as much as I can. Not selfish like I used to be, but someone kind and considerate of others. I want to quit acting like a brat and be a little more respectable. And you're telling me to stop?"

"Why...do you want that all of a sudden?"

"For a split second, I was glad that Natsuki rejected you."

Uta blinked at him in surprise.

Tatsuya dropped his gaze. "I was disappointed in myself. But if I put in the

work like Natsuki did and tried to change my behavior...then I figured even someone as low as me could transform.”

The way he delivered each word stoically while hiding his emotions was completely different from the normal Tatsuya. And it truly showed what he was striving to become.

“Also...if I became a better guy, I could help you more.” He cut himself off there.

A blanket of silence settled between them for a while. The noise from the gym was far away, and it was so quiet that it felt like time had come to a halt.

“Tatsu, listen...” Keeping her eyes fixed on Tatsuya, Uta suddenly inhaled deeply and then screamed, “You moooron!”

I was wondering what she’d come up with, but she had stooped to name-calling. Reita and I exchanged glances.

“H-Huh?” Tatsuya furrowed his brows, perplexed.

Uta seemed furious; she thrust her pointer finger at him. “You were happy I got rejected? Of course you were!”

Her unexpected assertion threw him for a loop. “Huh? Th-That can’t be right. Any guy with a decent personality wouldn’t think that.”

She kept on the pressure, not allowing him to recover from his confusion. “I mean, don’t you love me?! If Hikarin had rejected Natsu, then I would’ve been happy too! How could we not feel that way?!” she shouted with over-the-top honesty, her cheeks flushing madly.

“What?” Tatsuya uttered, stunned.

Should I be hearing this? Definitely not, right? Sorry.

“If you were glad, then that just means you were seriously head over heels for me, right?!”

Tatsuya couldn’t say a thing. His silence was all the confirmation she needed.

“I’m happy to hear that, and I don’t think you’re the worst. It’s normal to feel nasty things sometimes. We’re only human. So don’t do that... Don’t hate

yourself.”

“Uta, are you...?”

“I’m *not* crying!” She shook her head, tears spilling down her cheeks. “If you want to help me, then...stay the Tatsu I like!”

Seeing Uta cry put Tatsuya in a nervous panic.

She rubbed her eyes with her arm before continuing. “I don’t want to discredit all the hard work you’ve done. But I hate that the Tatsu I know is disappearing. So please, stay the version of you I like.”

Their gazes locked, and for a few moments, there was only silence.

Finally, Tatsuya let out a long sigh, as if to vent all the tension that had been building up inside of him. “I’m sorry, Uta.”

“You don’t need to apologize.”

“To be real, I still don’t really like myself. I’m stupid, rude, inconsiderate, selfish, pushy... My faults are endless. I’m nothing compared to Reita and Natsuki.”

“Yep. You’ve got that right!”

“You’re not even gonna deny it? You know, I’m more sensitive than you guys think.”

“Hey, it’s the truth! I know you get hurt super easily. I also know that you actually think about lots of stuff. Like when you get carried away and say something weird, you beat yourself up and reflect on it quietly.”



“Shut up. How do you know all that?” Tatsuya asked.

Tatsuya, so you also have the special skill of self-flagellation just like me? The knowledge moved my heart. Reita gave me the side-eye. *I feel a new sense of kinship with Tatsuya. We’re the same type of person. I’ll always be your friend, only me...*

“Ah ha ha! Duuummy! Tatsu, I pay more attention than you think.” Seeing that his regular expressions and tone had returned, Uta grinned widely, satisfied.

Tatsuya looked up at the sky, his expression brighter now. “I got it. If you like me the way I am, then I’ll quit forcing myself to change.”

Reita and I looked at each other and smiled wryly at the same time. We’d come up with all sorts of plans, but it turned out we wouldn’t need any of them. After all, there was nothing that’d work more effectively on Tatsuya than Uta.

“Halftime’s almost over. I better get going.” Tatsuya turned away from Uta and began walking back to the gym.

“Hey, you’re going to get that win, right?” she asked.

A small chuckle escaped from his lips, and then he simply said, “Leave it to me.”

The referee signaled that our break was over. Both teams stepped onto the court, and the second half began.

“All right, let’s go!” Unlike before, there was vigor behind Tatsuya’s expression.

I nudged his shoulder. “Hey.”

“What?”

“In the second half, let’s compete over who scores the most points. Loser buys drinks.”

“Huh? Where’s this coming from?”

“Are you running away? The *normal* Tatsuya wouldn’t run from a challenge!”

“Y... You jackass.” He scrunched up his face and groaned. “Eavesdropping is a terrible habit.”

“Everyone was worried about you.”

“Sorry,” he said awkwardly. “I didn’t think you guys would worry about me.”

“So, are you gonna run away?” I asked.

“Course I’ll do it. You’d better not regret it.” Tatsuya grinned.

Yeah, that’s the spirit! Otherwise, you’re not yourself.

Our team started with possession of the ball. Reita threw it in, and Tatsuya caught it. Our opponents had taken up their defensive formation. As usual, marking Tatsuya was number five, Kijima-kun.

“Hey, Nagiura, the look on your face’s changed,” Kijima-kun remarked.

“Pretty much. I was trying to be considerate in my own way, but a bunch of guys told me to do whatever I want,” Tatsuya replied.

“You’ve been acting creepy lately. You used to obsess over scoring points, but then you suddenly flipped to passing in front of the goal and saying stuff like, ‘Points are points—doesn’t matter who scores.’ You weren’t always an admirable guy like that,” Kijima-kun said. “You’re supposed to be selfish and have a terrible personality. It’d put me in a tight spot if you’re not like that. If you become one of the smart kids, who’s going to lead us? Right, Nagiura?”

“Every single one of you says whatever the hell you like,” Tatsuya complained as he dribbled.

Kijima-kun faced him, bending his knees and dropping his hips low towards the floor. They went still for a split second and glared at each other.

“Come at me.”

Tatsuya scoffed. “Here I go.” He started with a crossover and stepped to his right. It wasn’t a fake, so Kijima-kun could keep up. Number three, who was nearby, also joined in to defend. However, Tatsuya used his arm to forcibly keep them at bay and pushed forward. He kept his body low until he made his way in front of the hoop, and then leaped up with all his strength. He had so much vertical lift that it looked like he was about to dunk, but he flicked the ball in.

D-Dang, that was way too forceful... The only phrase that came to mind to describe his play was “brute force.” Some referees might’ve even called a foul.

“That’s two points,” Tatsuya said, provoking me.

It’s a game, then. I’ll show him!

Class four took possession of the ball, and we switched to defense. *Our personal contest is important, but we’re getting our priorities backwards if we lose the match. So I’ll give my defense a hundred percent too.*

Kijima-kun passed the ball to Mei, who forwarded it to their number two.

“Ack!” yelled number two. He fumbled the catch, and the ball went rolling.

Reita scooped it up.

“Fast break!” Tatsuya immediately shouted.

I instantly dashed forward. I caught a beautiful pass from Reita right in front of the three-point line. I thought I’d shaken off all other players, opponents and teammates alike, but Mei appeared next to me.

He must’ve sprinted as fast as he could. His breathing’s a mess, but he’s frantically trying to defend. You really are serious, Mei! Overcome with delight, I felt my lips curve into a smile.

“I won’t let you!” he yelled in a determined tone.

I threw him off-balance with a dribble—he was completely at my mercy. I was the one who’d drilled the fundamentals of defense into Mei, though he’d likely practiced on his own. I struggled to shake him off and came to a stop. Searching for a way out, I scanned my surroundings. Okajima-kun and Hino had run to the hoop, but our opponents had also returned to defend. Making a pass would be hard.

So I took a shot.

“Huh?” Mei said. Wary of a drive, he’d distanced himself from me, but that made it so he couldn’t react to my shot. The ball soared from the three-point line to the hoop and dropped through the net yet again.

“Don’t stand so far away when you’re defending against a shooter,” I said.

“Y-You didn’t teach me thaaat!” Mei complained.

I patted his shoulder and returned to our side of the court. “That’s three for me,” I said, holding up three fingers to egg Tatsuya on.

“Dumbass. Who shoots a three during a fast break?” he scoffed.

“It went in, so it worked out.”

“Now, listen here...” Tatsuya said, exasperated.

A few minutes ago, he would’ve ignored any attempts to rile him up. He was griping now because he wanted to win the match, not just our little contest. After all, he was playing basketball, a sport we loved—of course winning would be more fun.

The final score was forty-two to twenty-two. Our first round had ended with a crushing twenty-point victory. Mei and the others of class four were eliminated here.

“We didn’t win, but it was fun... I mean it. I feel like this was the first time I helped my team in a sport. I even scored points! I owe it all to you, Natsuki.” Mei was covered in sweat as he thanked me with a bright smile.

He’s probably hiding his frustration, but those are still his honest sentiments. So I’m happy too.

“Though, I wasn’t able to show her my cool side,” he continued.

“I’m not sure that’s true,” I said.

“Huh? But we didn’t win.” He shot me a baffled look.

I grabbed his shoulders and turned him around. Funayama-san walked up to him and bowed in our direction.

“She’ll probably tell you herself.” I made eye contact with her and then turned away. *They can handle the rest. They don’t need our advice anymore.*

On my way back to my class, I heard Mei scream. “Whaaat?! A-Are you really okay with *me*?!”

Mei, you’re way too loud. A wry smile inadvertently crept across my face. I

glanced over my shoulder. Both of them were bright red and hanging their heads. *Be happy.*

When I returned to where my classmates were, Tatsuya shouted at me. “Hey, Natsuki! Hurry up.” Apparently, he’d been waiting for me.

“Are you buying me a drink?” I asked.

“Shut up, you know I gotta. I lost by one point,” he replied, wearing an extremely vexed expression.

I took my place next to him as we headed to the vending machine.

“Dammit. I would’ve won if I’d just made my last shot.”

He was grumbling, but to begin with, half of my points had been assists from Tatsuya. *No matter how you spin it, Tatsuya won in terms of contributions. We both know that, but unfortunately it was a contest for most points scored.*

We left the gym and walked to the vending machine on the side of the club building. Tatsuya bought two sports drinks and tossed one to me.

“Thanks!” I said before quenching my thirst. *Ahhh, delicious! This is the best stuff after exercising.*

While I was thoroughly enjoying my victory drink, Tatsuya said, “Sorry, Natsuki.”

“Where’s that coming from?” I asked.

“I lashed out at you during the school festival.”

Oh, he’s talking about when I rejected Uta. “I figured it’d just be a given if you hit me. Nothing for you to apologize over.”

“No. You were just... You just liked Hoshimiya more than Uta, right?”

I nodded wordlessly. As he’d said, I had chosen Hikari.

“Then it wasn’t something for me to butt in on. But I still did. I was selfishly bent on the idea that you’d make Uta happy. I was fine if you were the one—it gave me peace of mind and helped me give up... It was like I was entrusting her to you, so I felt betrayed.”

“It’s my fault for being uncertain. Until the very end, I was agonizing over

what I wanted to do and whether I liked Hikari or Uta more. So I'm the one who gave you grief. Sorry."

"Don't apologize. That's just what love is. Besides, I forced what I wanted on you and gave you more baggage to lug around. I regret that. It wasn't something an outsider like me should've said."

"What do you mean, 'outsider'? You know that's not true."

"No way, I was an outsider. It wasn't my stage to stand on." Tatsuya smiled boldly. The way he radiated confidence was just like his normal self. "Don't regret it, Natsuki. I'm gonna take Uta."

"Yeah?"

"I'm gonna become a man who can make her happy," he declared. There was not a trace of hesitation in his countenance, and I genuinely thought he looked cool.

"Stop persisting in a weird direction like you've been doing, though." *It's fine to change yourself, but there are parts of you I want to stay the same. Changing everything about yourself won't go well—just like how I was that spring, when Tatsuya and I fought.*

"Ah, shut it! I'm thinking a lot in my own way. Mistakes happen. But." Tatsuya paused. "You guys like me more than I thought, so I'll call it quits."

This guy's getting audacious now. "What're you going to do concretely to become a man who can make Uta happy?"

"Well, I've got a pretty easy-to-see benchmark right here—you. I'll surpass you first," he said, oozing confidence.

"Dude, uh... That's a grade-schooler approach."

"Shut it. I'll start by getting better grades than you. Your ass is grass, and I'm gonna sow it!"

"Sow it? Don't you mean 'mow it'?" I thoughtlessly retorted.

Tatsuya put me in a headlock. *That hurts!*

Reita, who had approached without us noticing, watched me flail wildly. He

shrugged.

“Hey! Help me, Reita!” I yelled.

“I think it’s for the best that you get a healthy dose of suffering at least once,” he said.

“Why?! Hey, wait, it hurts! It hurts!”

Reita watched me struggle in pain with an amused smile. *Hey, he’s terrifying!*

“...apparently like that, though.”

“Not particularly... But you know what they say: just do what you want.”

“Kinda makes you happy, huh?”

“No way! But...maybe I’m a little hopeful.”

Tatsuya and I fist-bumped before our second game.

“Let’s win this whole thing,” I said.

He laughed. “What the heck, dude? With you and me here, ‘course. We can’t lose.”

After that, we won our second round against class 2-1 in a landslide victory, forty-six points to twenty. The battle got intense in the semifinals, though. We were up against class 2-3. Their players were the current captain of the basketball club Kataoka-senpai, Iwano-senpai, and Kurano Masato from the soccer team—he was also the culprit behind the girls’ basketball team’s dispute during the rainy season.

Reita displayed a rare show of fighting spirit; the way he said, “We’re definitely going to win,” left an impression on me.

Although Iwano-senpai put his large frame to good use catching rebounds and Kataoka-senpai used his excellent passing skills to capitalize on his teammates while also keeping Tatsuya in check with his impressively persistent defense, we managed to scrape out a victory with my shooting accuracy and Reita completely shutting Kurano out.

The final score was twenty-six to twenty-four. It was a low-scoring game where both teams' defenses shined. The moment we clinched the win, all the spectators exploded into roaring cheers.

Right, it's the semis, so there'll be more people in the audience. We're nearing the end of the ball game competition too. The only events remaining were the soccer and basketball finals. The other events had made rapid headway and finished up. Of the three courts, two were already being used as seating areas for students. Our classmates were mainly gathered on the right side, so we moved over there.

"Oh! Good work, basketball team! You're in the finals now!"

I responded to their acclamations as I made my way to the wall and sat down with my back against it. A wave of fatigue had suddenly hit me. Though the games were only ten-minute halves, we needed to play three matches in one day to reach the finals, which was backbreaking. The ball game competition lasted for only a day, so overexerting ourselves was unavoidable.

"Oh yeah, what's our class's points look like?" I asked Hikari, who sat next to me.

"Ummm... They announced the results somewhere in the middle." She turned to our classmates. "Does anyone know how we're doing?"

"We were in fourth. We placed second in soccer, so we should be a bit higher now," Fujiwara answered. "We placed fourth in volleyball too, so we've got a decent chance, depending on how basketball goes."

"So you're basically telling us to win?" I questioned.

"Exactly," she said with a laugh.

Right then, the crowd let out some especially loud cheers. The other side of the semifinals was over, meaning our next opponent was decided.

"Who won?" I asked.

"3-1. Yanagishita-senpai's class," Tatsuya replied.

Yanagishita-senpai's the one standing in our way, huh? I sorta had a feeling that's what would happen.

“I watched from the front row—they’re strong,” Tatsuya said.

“I couldn’t ask for a better opponent,” I replied. *Playing matches after all this time is tons of fun! The stronger the opponent, the more my blood gets pumping.* That knowledge spurred my exhausted body on, and I stood up. “Let’s go, guys.”

Tatsuya, Reita, Hino, and Okajima-kun followed behind me.

We’re gonna win so we can enjoy this competition—and our youth—to the max.

“Miori.”

Hearing my name, I turned around. “Reita-kun.” Standing there was the very person I’d expected to see: my first boyfriend.

Reita-kun was handsome, kind, friendly, and fun to talk with. He was a genius who could do pretty much anything with great skill, and as far I could recall, he had no faults. Ever since I’d started dating him, I’d become the envy of the girls around me. There had even been cases when they’d blatantly directed their dark, jealous feelings straight at me. That was just how popular he was.

In reality, he was wasted on someone like me. Everyone else was right, and I was fully aware of that.

“Now you just have the finals left,” I said.

“Yeah. We got this far thanks to Natsuki and Tatsuya,” he said.

“You were super important too! Your passes were spot-on!”

I was being honest. Reita-kun was proficient at passing. The moment his teammates became free, time after time he’d sent them passes that seemed like they were homing in on them. He probably had expansive court vision. It wasn’t flashy, but he was indubitably supporting his team.

“I guess my soccer background is a bit useful,” he said with a dry smile. “How did your games go?”

“You spent time teaching me soccer, but we still lost in the second round.” I

laughed, but I was actually extremely frustrated. *We would've won if I had just made that shot. Dammit... God dammit...*

"Don't force yourself to laugh when you're frustrated," he said.

"Reita-kun, sometimes it's scary how sharp you are."

"People tell me that a lot, but I pay special attention to you, so maybe you're right to some degree." He shrugged.

If I were serious, would that have made my heart skip? However, my heart remained calm. And Reita-kun noticed even that.

"We're going to win. I'll work hard so we do," he said. "So will you root for me?"

"Of course I will. I'm watching you closely." I nodded earnestly. Even if what I felt for him wasn't love, I truly did like him. And my desire to cheer on the person I liked when they were doing their best was no lie.

"Do you still like Natsuki?" Reita-kun asked.

I froze. It felt like time had come to a stop. I couldn't retort with anything. "Sorry," was the only thing I could manage to wring out.

"I'm fine being second to Natsuki. As long as you'll cheer for me," he said. He turned around and began walking towards the court where the finals were to take place.

"Good luck, Reita-kun!" I yelled after him.

He looked back and shot me a sincerely elated smile. *Why does he look so happy from hearing me say that? It really warms my heart. It does...but it also hurts. I'm so hopelessly sad and bitter.*



How happy would I become if I grew to love him? But only the words of my childhood friend who always needed babysitting stirred my heart. I shook my head, banishing the images of him from my mind.

Hey, Reita-kun. I want to love you. So please wait a little longer...just a little bit longer.

“...What’s that mean?”

“She likes Natsuki? Motomiya does...?”

Two people exchanged puzzled looks.

Chapter 4: The Finals

It was time for the boys' basketball finals. This was the last act of the ball game competition, so nearly the entire student body was here. The kids who had absolutely zero interest in the event were likely skipping out elsewhere, but there were more people taking the opportunity to watch while chatting. Tons of students sat along both sides of the center court. There were plenty of spectators standing on the second floor too.

Almost all of class 1-2 was cheering from our bench. The other team's bench was the same. They even had someone wearing a headband and hitting a plastic megaphone who looked like the leader of a cheer squad. *Where did they get that...? They've got way too much team spirit. This feels like a game between two powerhouse schools.*

"Whoooa... I'm feelin' nervous," Okajima-kun said as he scanned our surroundings. He was quivering.

"Of cooourse the crowd would get huge at this stage. I'm freaking out a little too." Hino retied the laces of his gym shoes, forcing a smile.

"Half of them are just sitting here. I doubt they're actually going to watch," Reita said, trying to loosen them up.

"D-Doesn't that just mean half of them are actually watching us play?" Okajima-kun replied.

I didn't expect Okajima-kun to be this nervous. "Tatsuya, say something to them too." I turned to him, but his eyes were locked on Reita for some reason. "Tatsuya? Something up?"

He suddenly snapped out of whatever it was with a small gasp. "R-Right... It's nothing. The nerves will fly away once the match starts."

"Maybe that's true for you, Nagiura," Okajima-kun groaned.

Panicking Okajima-kun aside, Tatsuya's acting weird. The moment I thought that, Tatsuya smacked his cheeks with his hands.

“Aight! Focus!” he muttered, and then the spirit returned to his eyes.

Looks like I’m fussing over him too much. Okajima-kun keeps grumbling, but he’ll probably be fine too.

“All right, we’re starting!” called the referee.

We lined up in the center of the court. I looked around the gym and spotted my friends among the bustling crowd. Miori and I locked eyes for a split second before she averted her gaze, wearing a disgruntled expression. *Hey! Cheer for me!*

Serika was, strangely enough, waving a pen light. *Where’d you get that?!*

Mei and Funayama-san were next to each other, their attention set in our direction. *I’m glad they’re getting along well.*

Iwano-senpai looked my way, his arms crossed. He taciturnly shot me a thumbs-up.

And of course, our classmates were gathered around our team bench. Hikari, Uta, Nanase, and Fujiwara cheered for us loudly.

“We’re gonna win this thing for sure,” Tatsuya said, rousing the rest of us up.

Yeah. When he talks, even when he’s being quiet, his words have a magical effect. Hino, Reita, and Okajima-kun—everyone’s morale had clearly shot up.

However, there was someone on the enemy team who possessed even more charisma than Tatsuya.

“Let’s have a good game,” Yanagishita-senpai said.

“Yanagishita-senpai. Long time no see,” Tatsuya told him.

“Yeah, not since I retired. I heard rumors that you’d settled down lately, but it doesn’t look true.”

The one chatting with Tatsuya in a friendly manner was the former captain of the basketball team, Yanagishita Yugo.

The number two on the other team greeted Reita and Okajima-kun. “Hey, Shiratori, Okajima. You guys are lookin’ good.”

“Fortunately,” Reita said.

“Hello, Watanabe-senpai! How are you doing?” Okajima-kun asked.

“Every day it’s study, study, study. Show me a good time today, ‘kay?”
Watanabe-senpai replied.

He must be an upperclassman from the soccer team. Watanabe-senpai? I vaguely remember that name. Wasn’t he the soccer team’s former ace? Their other players also looked like sporty people. I’d expect nothing less since they made it to the finals. Their physique is also different from first-years like us.

“Haibara-kun,” Yanagishita-senpai said. “I watched all your games. Wanna join the basketball team?”

My eyes widened. *I wondered what he was gonna say, but...that surprised me.*

“I know you’re part of the light music club, but I just think it’s a waste of your skills. You played in middle school, right? Our team’s competitive, but I’m sure you could make it to the starting lineup,” Yanagishita-senpai said.

To be honest, his invitation put me over the moon. I never ever would’ve imagined that he would notice me. In my first round as a first-year, I couldn’t keep up with the other members, so I’d stayed behind after practices to train on my own. Yanagishita-senpai had been the one to teach me the fundamentals—he was my basketball teacher.

“Thanks for the invite, but I can’t. Sorry,” I said.

“Really? Ah, right. You’re a terrific singer and guitarist too. Sorry for springing that on you out of the blue.” He forced a smile. “It was a futile invitation from the get-go.”

“Okay, we’re starting now! Time for the jump ball,” the ref said, deciding that we’d finished talking.

The tallest kid in our class, Okajima-kun, and their number eight took their places in the center circle. The ref threw the ball, and it whirled high up into the air.

“Holy— That’s high!” Okajima-kun exclaimed without thinking.

I was of the same sentiment. I almost couldn’t believe my eyes—a giant was

dancing through the air. Class 3-1 secured the ball. *Their number eight must be around 190 centimeters. That's way too tall! He's definitely one of the main factors behind their victories.*

"Time for the first point. Stay cool, guys." Yanagishita-senpai raised a pointer finger while dribbling the ball.

It felt like the clamor around us had suddenly gone quiet. The sound of the ball bouncing up and down seemed frightfully heavy.

Tatsuya faced Yanagishita-senpai, the three-point line sandwiched in between them. *He's coming.* As I thought that, Yanagishita-senpai simultaneously passed Tatsuya. He penetrated our line from the top of the key. I gave up on marking their number three and immediately went to cover Tatsuya.

But the instant I did, Yanagishita-senpai flicked his eyes towards number three. Thinking that he was about to pass, I began to return to my former position, but he took that opportunity to push forward. *It was a fake!*

Yanagishita-senpai stepped in with a crossover, and I couldn't react at all. I wondered if he was just going to continue charging forward, but he stopped at the short corner zone and made one fluid jump shot. The ball smoothly sailed through the net.

"Whoa!" yelled the audience. They'd been completely still until now, so their cheers were even more deafening. His movements were unbelievably elegant—you couldn't help but be sucked in by his every action.

"Damn him... He hasn't lost it at all!" Tatsuya shouted, a vein popping on his forehead. However, his lips were curled up in a fierce grin.

"And that's why he's worth taking down, right?" I said.

"Yeah. Natsuki, let's work together. We're gonna blow this crowd's minds."

We were on offense next. With Yanagishita-senpai on him, Tatsuya passed the ball to Reita. I rushed to the wing, and Reita sent the ball my way.

When I faced the hoop, number three was against me in a defensive stance with his hips low. He was wary of any attempt to drive the ball past him, but he also kept close, probably because he knew I was a shooter. I could tell he was a

seasoned player based on his perfect spacing. I tried to throw him off with my gaze and slight movements, but he stayed unperturbed.

“Natsuki!”

My body reacted as soon as I heard my name. Tatsuya had shaken off Yanagishita-senpai and run across the other side of the court. I passed to him at bullet speed when he got in front of the hoop. He tightly grasped the ball and did a layup.

“Nice one, Natsuki,” he said.

“How’d you shake him off?” I asked.

“Got behind the deny. You know, with a backdoor cut.”

Yanagishita-senpai whistled. “Things are getting fun now.” His grin was instinctive. He didn’t even notice he was showing us his pearly whites.

It was time for the third-years’ offense. I waited for my chance as Yanagishita-senpai and the experienced number three passed the ball around. As if on a whim, Yanagishita-senpai launched into their play. He once again got past our defense and then passed back to the number three.

I’d abandoned my mark on number three again to cover Tatsuya, but in doing so, I’d left him open at the three-point line. *I need to pressure him!* Trying to disrupt his shot, I extended my arms and jumped up, but... *It was a fake?!*

The number three transitioned into a dribble instead, sidestepping me slightly to the right, and passed. It was a high, floaty pass. *Who’s going to catch that?* Suddenly, their tall number eight appeared. He caught the ball right in front of the hoop and leaped up. *What’s he doi—?*

“N-No way. Whoa...”

BAM! He dunked the ball in with a staggering slam. The audience exploded into wild roars. Even the uninterested students were watching now.

I was blown away. *What’s going on? Isn’t this a ball game competition? What...*

“We formed the ultimate team to win at basketball in return for sacrificing the other events. Pretty awesome, right?” Yanagishita-senpai bragged, puffed

up with pride.

He looks like he's having a blast—he always does when he's playing basketball. His thrilled grin suddenly made memories of the past rush back to me.

Back when I entered high school the first time, I blithely joined the basketball team. *I'm pretty tall. I'll become popular. It seems like something an outgoing person would do. I like it the most out of all the sports.* It was a decision merely based on superficial reasons, which was why I soon regretted it.

"Th-This is too much..." I panted heavily, splayed out on the gym floor.

On top of having no experience and being atrocious, I also wasn't learning the ropes well. I tried to hang on and improve, but I'd been a member of the go home club in middle school, so it felt like I'd never catch up to the others with my sedentary body.

There were two other students who had no basketball background like me, but because they'd been part of other sports clubs, they could easily keep up with practice. I was the only one leagues behind everyone else.

And yet, Yanagishita-senpai had amicably spoken to me. "Ha ha! Having it rough?"

None of the other upperclassmen paid me any attention; only he was different.

"I... I can't run anymore," I groaned.

"What're you saying? We're just getting to the meat of things. It's time for individual training," he said.

"I... I want to, but I really can't today."

"Don't you want to catch up to Tatsuya and the boys? If a beginner's gonna do that, you need some serious resolve. I'll help you out if you're gonna plug away. As a special deal, I'll even teach you the basics myself."

"Huh? Yanagishita-senpai, you'll give me lessons?"

“I won’t force you, of course. The choice is yours. So, what’ll you do?”

“I... I’ll do it! Please teach me!”

In the beginning, it was all thanks to Yanagishita-senpai that I continued playing basketball.

“Hang in there. You’ll improve—I guarantee it,” he said.

I was able to work hard because he looked after me. He made me believe I could keep it up for a little bit longer.

Yanagishita-senpai likely thought he was just helping out the club misfit, but at the time, he was my savior. He’d taught me not only basketball’s fundamentals, but also how fun it was.

As a result, though all that awaited me was a gray-colored youth, I didn’t regret joining the basketball team. I owed that to Yanagishita-senpai for showing me the joy in basketball.

I’d only known him for a short amount of time before he retired in the summer, but I was indebted to him the most. All these years, I’d wanted to show him how much I’d improved. The opportunity to accomplish that had luckily fallen right into my lap.

I know that the Yanagishita-senpai of the present has no recollection of helping me out. Still... I came to love basketball because of him, and now I’ve improved a ton. That’s why I’ll win this match to prove it. And then I’ll thank him.

There were three minutes left in the first half. The score was twelve to eighteen—we were behind by six points. With Yanagishita-senpai hounding him, Tatsuya couldn’t initiate, so it was up to me.

I caught a pass from Hino and quickly took a shot without any fakes. My mark, number three, misread my play and clicked his tongue. Though the ball hit the hoop with a loud rattle, it went in—I’d made a three-pointer.

“Three more points.” The moment those words slipped out of my mouth, I realized I’d relaxed my guard.

“Fast break!” Yanagishita-senpai yelled.

All the third-years simultaneously ran off, and he catapulted the ball from the hoop all the way up front. Neither I, Tatsuya, nor anyone else on our team could react. Yanagishita-senpai’s long pass went to their number two, Watanabe-senpai, who effortlessly made a layup.

They easily got two points back. Dammit, they got us right when we were focused on offense.

“Fast breaks are the easiest thing to teach beginners, since all they need to do is run forward.” Yanagishita-senpai shot me a triumphant look as though to provoke me.

He carefully deliberates and polishes his plan. He never cuts corners with anything he does, and he’s seriously trying to win the ball game competition. I’d expect nothing less from him. But I’m not complaining—it wouldn’t be any fun otherwise.

“Natsuki,” Tatsuya said as he carried the ball forward.

“Yeah?” I replied.

“Beat him,” he said bluntly.

I could use more explanation than that.

I caught Tatsuya’s pass in the right wing. Facing me, as always, was number three. Tatsuya handed out instructions to Okajima-kun, Hino, and Reita via gestures, and then went to the left. They all distanced themselves from me and number three. The other team was employing a man-to-man defense, so they followed my teammates. Number three and I were the only ones left on the right side of the court.

“Isolation...?” muttered number three. “You underestimate me.” His motivation spiked, and I could feel him thinking, “Come at me!”

I get why he’s mad. We’re playing under the assumption that I can bring number three down in a one-on-one when we’re behind. From his perspective, we’re treating him as the lesser player here. Tatsuya, you bastard, is this what you meant by “beat him”?

Ball in hand, I fell still. Number three and I glared at each other. One second, two seconds passed, and our surroundings settled into complete silence. On the third second, I made my move.

I kicked off the floor and sharply cut to the right. However, I couldn't shake him off. I stopped and dribbled the ball between my legs to straighten my posture in one step. At the same time, I flicked my gaze to the hoop.

"Oh no you don't!" yelled number three.

The moment he jumped to block my shot, I drove left and slipped past him. Yanagishita-senpai had been the one to teach me that fakes should be made with the slightest body and eye movement.

Yanagishita-senpai tried to help his teammate, but he couldn't make it in time. I was faster to release my shot. Right after I got us two points back, the halftime whistle blew.

"Tatsuya, listen, you—" I said.

"What? I didn't need to explain. Wouldn't have changed what you needed to do, anyway," he said, stifling a snicker.

The five of us returned to our bench and were greeted with blaring encouragement.

"Here, Natsuki-kun." Hikari handed me a sports drink.

I quenched my parched throat. *Huh, is this a parallel world where Hikari's a manager? Hey, that's pretty nice!*

"Three-point difference, huh?" I muttered when I checked the score. It was seventeen to twenty—we were three points behind.

"It's nothin' to mourn over. There's a clear path to victory," Tatsuya said matter-of-factly as he wiped his sweat off with a towel. "You, Natsuki. You're better than that number three. We're gonna pressure them there."

"Yeah, but the isolation strategy was way too obvious. We can't do that every time," I said.

"It's fine. That was just feeling him out."

This is unexpected. “Are you sure? Don’t you want to score points too? Knock Yanagishita-senpai down?”

“It’s frustrating, but I’m still no match for him. If we wanna win, we need a fight from an angle we *can* win. I learned that from Yanagishita-senpai, so no more complaints.” Wearing a savage grin, Tatsuya eyed Yanagishita-senpai on the opposite bench.

It seems like those two are fighting on a larger scale. All right, I’ll trust Tatsuya here. I don’t have a broad outlook on the game, so I can’t control the flow. I have a limited pool of plays I excel at: shooting and one-on-ones. I don’t need to overreach by trying things I can’t do. I’m just a piece on the board. I’ll focus on the role he wants me to play.

“Use me well, Tatsuya,” I said.

“Who do you think you’re talking to? I’m the basketball team’s ace,” he replied.

Our break was almost over. Once the timer hit zero, the match started up again. When I stood and started walking towards the court, someone smacked me on the shoulders with full force—and not just me, Tatsuya too.

“All right! Go get ’em, you guys!”

I looked behind me to see Uta smiling at us.

When all five of us were back on the court, Reita restlessly glanced around the gym.

“Reita, something wrong?” I asked.

“Natsuki... Do you know where Miori is?”

“Hmm? She’s right there.” I pointed to the end of the second floor. “No idea why she’s way over there, though.” Miori was with some girls from her class. For some reason, they were watching the game a few steps back from the railing, so even someone as observant as Reita would struggle to find her.

He stared at me with a serious expression. “Miori told me you’re good at finding her when it comes to hide-and-seek.”

“Now that you mention it...” I thought for a second. “Yeah, I guess that’s

true.” *I vaguely kinda sorta remember that.* I massaged my temples; it felt like I was about to recall something.

“Natsuki, don’t take your eyes off the ball,” Reita said.

We began the second half with possession of the ball.

“The points are going to come from you, yeah?” Yanagishita-senpai said.

“You’re overestimating me,” I replied.

Yanagishita-senpai was now marking me, and number three was on Tatsuya. *Their new positioning isn’t much of a countermeasure against our offense. If I can get past number three, then so can Tatsuya.*

Tatsuya must’ve thought the same, because he immediately dived in with a drive. However, number eight instantly appeared to double-team him. He used his giant build to block Tatsuya’s path.

Tatsuya clicked his tongue.

“Tatsuya! Over here!” Reita shouted. Tatsuya passed the ball to him.

Since number eight had quickly moved to cover Tatsuya, his original mark, Okajima-kun, was now unguarded. Realizing that fact before me, Reita sent the ball to Okajima-kun, who was hanging around the low post area, with a pass as sharp as an arrow.

As expected of Reita, he’s speedy at assessing the situation.

“Nice pass!” Okajima-kun caught the ball and took a shot from right in front of the hoop. However, with nimble movements that didn’t seem possible for someone of his colossal size, number eight leaped up and smacked the ball out of the air.

“Huh?!” yelled Okajima-kun, shocked.

That guy doesn’t have any basketball background, but he’s huge and fast.

“They’ll keep two guys on Tatsuya even if that means leaving Okajima-kun free half the time,” Reita noted as we moved back to our side of the court.

“Even if Okajima-kun gets the ball, they’re confident number eight can stop

him from behind,” I said. *They adjusted their plan fast and handily covered up their weak point.*

“S-Sorry!” Okajima-kun said.

“Don’t let it get you! We’ll get the next one!” I exclaimed. It wasn’t his fault, but it would be harder to attack now. And to begin with...

“Nice one, Yanagishita!”

The third-years clearly had the edge when it came to overall skill.

Yanagishita-senpai drove past Tatsuya and easily sidestepped me when I came to help. He boldly took a shot from the center. The ball plummeted through the net.

“This is bad,” I muttered. We didn’t have a solution, and all the while, the point difference kept increasing. *What should we do? How do we overcome this? It’s vexing, but I can’t beat Yanagishita-senpai.*

“You’re not alone. We’re going to win together,” Reita said, and patted me on the shoulder.

I must’ve been making a grim expression. “I know, but...”

“Believe in me. I’m more useful than you think.”

I met his gaze and nodded when I saw the serious glint in his eyes. It was now time for our offense.

“Natsuki!”

My body moved instinctively when I heard my name. Tatsuya kept Yanagishita-senpai off the ball with a screen. I ran to the corner. The moment the ball came flying at me from Reita, I knew it was a flawless pass. I jumped as soon as I caught it.

People often say that the quality of a shot is decided by the quality of the pass. The second the ball left my fingers, I knew it would go in. The ball soared high in the air, swished clean through the net, and bounced off the floor.

Reita, Tatsuya, and I high-fived each other.

“See?” Reita said with a triumphant smile.

I didn't have any rebuttal. "I get why you told me not to take my eyes off the ball now."

We moved back for defense. Our opponents circulated the ball between themselves, waiting for their chance to attack. Number three made a slow throw to number two—Reita instantly rushed between them and intercepted the pass. He tipped the ball forward and dribbled away.

Their defense caught up to Reita, but he passed backwards to me. *He really is observant as heck!* For all that, Yanagishita-senpai still caught up to me.

"I'm gonna have to stop you here," he said, licking his lips.

Bring it on. I'll get past you this time. I maintained my momentum and jumped, acting like I was going to go for a layup. I raised the ball, but then swiftly pulled it back to my chest. Though my form was in disarray, I released the ball from that position.

"Double clutch?!" someone in the audience cried in surprise.

However, the ball got knocked down. Yanagishita-senpai had completely seen through me. He knew the layup would be a fake and had only reached his hand out for the second shot.

"Your rhythm resembles mine, and that makes it easy to read." He smiled gleefully.

It resembles yours because I learned it from you. I suppressed the urge to tell him and said, "I'll make the next one."

In basketball, there are no home runs to turn things around.

Due to Yanagishita-senpai's efforts, the point difference slowly widened as the game continued. There were two minutes left in the second half, and we were eight points behind. Time was against us.

We'll come back if we make three threes. Four two-pointers will tie us up. We can't miss anymore. The game will basically be over if the gap gets any bigger. I need to do everything I can to defend. In the time it took those thoughts to go through my head, the person in front of me had disappeared.

I turned around—Yanagishita-senpai had stepped in front of the hoop. *It's over if that goes in.*

Unlike me who'd given up, Tatsuya chased after Yanagishita-senpai. "I won't let you!" He blocked Yanagishita-senpai's shot with a tremendous jump, and the ball bounced off the backboard.

Reita reacted faster than anyone else and caught it. I automatically broke into a run.

"Natsuki!" The ball came flying into my hands.

The third-years were still on our side, too far away to catch me. I ran across the court and scored a layup.

"We can win! Focus up!" Tatsuya reinvigorated our team, which had been on the verge of surrendering.

That's why he's got what it takes to be the future captain. He makes me want to follow him.

There was one minute and twenty seconds left, and a six point difference. The spectators' cheers were remarkably louder. We were back on offense. Though Tatsuya had both number three and eight marking him, he forced his way between them. *You're going through them?!*

Number eight stepped in and forced Tatsuya to pass in the end. In the process, Tatsuya collapsed from the pressure of number eight's gigantic stature. Hino caught the ball right in front of the hoop and made the shot.

"Nice, Hino!" I exclaimed. "Being athletic is the only thing you've got going for you, but at least we can count on that!"

"Hey! That's not the only good thing about me!" he cried in an offended tone.

I left him behind and returned to defend. I knew what the other team would do.

The moment that Yanagishita-senpai shouted, "Fast break!" all the third-years dashed forward. But the same trick wouldn't work every time. We'd also returned. Unfortunately, Tatsuya was behind because of his fall, which meant Yanagishita-senpai was unguarded.

Reita was about to mark him, but I signaled to Reita with my hand. “I’ll stop him,” I said.

The ball reached Yanagishita-senpai’s hands right as I caught up to defend him. There was one minute left. If they scored another point here, the game truly would be over. I knew Yanagishita-senpai would try to deliver the finishing blow now. That was the type of person he was, after all.

“Here I come,” he said.

At the height of this tense moment, a scene from the past suddenly flashed through my mind.

“Become a starter, Haibara.”

It happened one night when I’d stayed behind late to practice more.

Dripping with sweat, Yanagishita-senpai patted my back and said, “Get better than me, then you and Tatsuya will both be our aces in the hole.”

“Where’s this coming from? That’s impossible for me. It takes all I got just to keep up with him,” I replied.

“Don’t say that! Believe in yourself. I *know* you can be better than me.” He was the only person who’d ever set such high expectations for me.

“Why do you think that?” I asked, flabbergasted.

Yanagishita-senpai shrugged his shoulders in an exasperated manner. “Because, you and I are the only ones who practice until this late.”

This was around the time when it had hit me that my high school debut was a failure. I regretted my naivete and imprudence. I realized I hadn’t put in enough effort. My world had been dyed gray, and I wanted to give up on just about everything.

But the only thing I didn’t want to betray was his expectations for me.

Our eyes locked. He piled on layers and layers of fakes with his gaze, but I didn’t bite. *I won’t fall for it! I’ve played one-on-ones against Yanagishita-senpai*

numerous times. If my rhythm is easy for him to read, then the same goes for me.

Yanagishita-senpai dribbled. *Scissor step. Crossover. React. Immediately turn.* He held me at an arm's length and rolled around, getting past me on the other side. But I had read that much, so I could keep up. I completely shut down his path to the hoop. However, Yanagishita-senpai stopped, immediately jumped backwards, and transitioned into taking a shot.

"A fadeaway?!" the spectators gasped.

I was the only one who knew it was coming. When Yanagishita-senpai was cornered, he would pull out his best shot, a fadeaway. I stepped forward and jumped with all my might.

"Haaah!" I roared. *I'll stop you for sure.* I desperately extended my fingers and grazed the ball. "Miss!"

My prayers were answered. The ball bounced off the hoop and flew high up. Number eight was lying in wait by the goal, but Tatsuya had returned to our side at some point. With a mighty leap, Tatsuya overwhelmed the giant and secured the rebound.

Damn, he took a fall and still made it back—he's fast. And he jumps way too high. What a beast!

"Counter!" Reita yelled.

Tatsuya threw the ball at Hino, who forwarded it to Reita. Yanagishita-senpai was off-balance because of the fadeaway, while number eight was still by our hoop. We were in the final seconds of the match, so the other third-years must've been fatigued. None of them could catch up. They'd retired from club activities, so Reita and the others won in terms of stamina. We easily scored.

"Don't back down! Attack!" Tatsuya instructed the others who were about to return to defend.

There were ten seconds left with a one point difference. We couldn't wait for the opponent to leisurely launch their offense. A full-court press was our chance to win now that we knew we had more stamina.

Yanagishita-senpai caught a pass and searched for an opening to break through. However, he didn't rush it. He knew the worst possible outcome would be if we stole the ball. He skillfully dribbled, playing for time. If he kept possession of the ball, we would run out of time.

"Tatsuya!"

"On it!"

Tatsuya and I double-teamed him and forced him to the edge of the court.

"Dammit!" For the first time, Yanagishita-senpai's expression twisted. There was nowhere for him to pass. Tatsuya stretched out his arm and slapped the ball away from Yanagishita-senpai, then grabbed it, dribbled away, and pushed his way forward—the hoop was right before his eyes.

As Yanagishita-senpai shouted, "I won't let you!" Tatsuya passed back to me.

"Natsuki! Take the shot!"

And I did. As the ball whirled through the air, the gym fell completely silent. The timer hit zero, and the end-of-match buzzer rang. Everyone's eyes followed the ball.

It fell through the net, and two points were added to our score.

"Whooooa!" The crowd exploded into the loudest cheers of the day. Our classmates rushed at us from the bench.

The match ended with a buzzer-beater. The final score was forty-five to forty-four. We had won.

"You got us," Yanagishita-senpai said.

"Yeah, we did. And Yanagishita-senpai," I said, "thank you."

"Same here, thanks. It was a good game. It's been a long time since I felt this sting."

"Well, that too, but I owe you for some other stuff." I bowed.

He shot me a questioning look and cocked his head to the side. *The Yanagishita-senpai of the present doesn't know what I mean, but hey, it's fine like this.*

“Natsuki! We won!” Tatsuya roared and threw his arm around my shoulders. Okajima-kun pounced on us. Even Hino and Reita piled on, and all five of us celebrated together. Our classmates joined our huddle.

Since we’d clinched first place in the boys’ basketball event, class 1-2 had won the ball game competition.



Once our jubilation had more or less died down, we left the gym to rest. The next thing I knew, the usual crew was around me. Myself, Tatsuya, Reita, Uta, Hikari, and Nanase—the six of us relaxed on a bench.

“Wow, we won. My heart’s racing,” Hikari said.

“Apparently it’s the first time a first-year class has ever won,” Reita said.

“Hey, it’s all thanks to me,” Tatsuya crowed. “We would’ve placed third or fourth if we hadn’t gotten first in basketball.”

“Tatsu, the credit’s not *all* yours,” Uta said.

“Shiratori-kun and Haibara-kun contributed a lot too,” Nanase said in agreement.

“Honestly, it just came down to stamina in the end,” I said.

“Those guys spend all their time sitting and studying for exams, so they were outta gas by the end,” Tatsuya said.

We all laughed together. The awkwardness that I’d felt yesterday had vanished. We were conversing like normal. I thought I’d been about to lose them, but we had returned to our group of six. I was elated.

“All righty! We should party!” Uta suggested.

“We’ve got practice today. Not like I can move anymore after this, though,” Tatsuya groaned.

Hikari laughed with pity. “Tatsuya-kun, you’ve got it hard.”

“Why don’t we celebrate on Saturday? We can gather after practice,” Reita said.

“Where should we go?” Nanase asked.

“Saize is the gentlest on my wallet! So we’ll meet at Saize!” Uta declared.

“Uta, why don’t we go to your family’s place for once? It’s big enough to seat the six of us,” Reita said.

“We could! But it’ll be more expensive than Saize!”

“Uta’s? What kind of place was it again? An okonomiyaki restaurant?” I asked.

“Mm-hmm. It’s near the shopping street,” Reita said. “It’s not that spacious, so our whole class wouldn’t fit inside, but if it’s just us, then I think it’ll be perfect.”

“Oh, but I’m broke. Let’s just hang out at the park instead,” Tatsuya said.

“Then it won’t be much of a party!” Uta protested.

Tatsuya and Uta were full of life. They quarreled over silly things while wearing smiles. *Our group of six isn’t complete without them leading us around. Now that I’ve got this back, I want to treasure it.*

Final Chapter: To Know Foolishness

It was the day after the ball game competition. As part of my usual routine, I went to school like always and worked my shift at Café Mares. I currently stood on the station platform while I waited for my train home. Someone tapped my shoulder.

Who is it? I glanced behind me.

Toting her guitar case, Serika shot me a peace sign. “Morning.”

“It’s night already,” I retorted.

“But everyone at my part-time job says ‘morning’ now.”

“Well, sure, at work... Wait, did you just get off too?” I guessed as much since she was still in the area this late, despite not having club activities today.

Serika shook her head. “I took a test? Well...maybe more like a tryout? Something like that.”

“Tryout?” I repeated. “For what? Are you joining a different band?”

“Yep.” She nodded, her face as blank as always. “It’s a band that invited me a long time ago, but they’re all pretty high-level musicians, and all of them are working adults besides me. I lost my nerve back then...but I wanted to give it a shot since I had the opportunity.”

Wow, Serika can get nervous? (Yes, how rude of me.) “How’d it go?”

“I passed. Yay.” She wagged her peace sign, deadpan all the while.

With her talents, of course she’d pass. A band of adults will be worlds above us...but no bias, I bet Serika will be the only one with pro-level skills. “Nice going. Congrats.”

“Mm-hmm. They can play really difficult songs without breaking a sweat, so it’ll be super good practice. It’ll be a struggle to keep up, though,” Serika said with a faraway look.

If she thinks so, then I'm sure they're an amazing band. I'm genuinely happy for her. I am, but does that mean our band is...?

"I'm thinking of playing in both," she told me, reading my question. "They're all adults, so they can only meet up on weekends, but I also want to practice on weekdays. And I really want to play with you guys. I want to perform during next year's school festival too."

"Are you sure? Won't that be pretty heavy on your schedule?"

"I'd just play guitar if I was at home anyway." She made it sound simple, but simultaneously being in two bands would be harder than I could imagine. "I want to improve as a guitarist. Plus, I want to play in both bands, and I won't compromise. I'll give both my all, and that's that."

Perhaps it was because she had just come from her tryouts, but I could feel passion behind her declaration.

"So, will you help me?" she asked.

How could I not agree? Since the day I'd first heard Serika play the guitar, I'd always been her fan. I didn't even care if I was just a stepping stone to help her spread her wings and go out into the world.

"Yeah." I held up my fist.

She bumped hers against mine.

"Then we'd better find a new drummer." I was excited for our new beginning. It was the same feeling as when we'd been part of Mishle.

"About that. I found a drummer who clicks with me. I'll introduce you guys." Serika called over a girl who'd been waiting a short distance away.

"Oh, you were with her?"

"Yep. She's only a third-year in middle school, but she plans on attending our high school."

The girl walked over. She was short and had a tidy but innocent appearance. She had large, round eyes and sported a bob with the tips of her hair curling upward. There was still an air of childishness to her, and she wore a middle school uniform. It was the same uniform that Miori and I used to wear.

The girl saluted sharply before energetically greeting me. “Long time no see, Haibara-senpai! I’m Yamano Saya. It’s a pleasure!”

As she’d hinted, we knew each other already.



A week passed after the ball game tournament. It was lunchtime now, and I had some time to kill after finishing my meal. Our class had been rowdy after tasting victory at first, but we'd settled back into familiar tranquility.

"Huh? Miori's absent?" I furrowed my brows after hearing the news from Hikari.

"Yeah. Apparently, she's been out since after the ball game competition," she said.

The six of us were gathered near the window side of the classroom. We all exchanged glances.

"Reita, have you heard anything?" I asked.

"I messaged her on RINE, but she didn't respond. I hope she's okay." He gazed at his phone, his face laden with concern.

"I heard from a teacher that she has a cold," Uta said.

"This feels much too long for only a cold," Nanase replied.

Maybe Serika will know more since they're in the same class. "I'll go ask Serika," I said. When I left the room, I felt a lot of gazes on me. What is it? This is weird.

The kids in class one were all staring at me. I poked my head into their classroom. Serika wasn't there. *Is she in the second music room? I've got time, so I'll go look for her. Still, Miori almost never gets sick. Idiots aren't supposed to catch colds. Well, I guess flu season is starting. Maybe I'll swing by her house on my way home and check up on her.* Such thoughts were running through my head as I passed the girls' bathroom.

"Is that rumor about Motomiya true? Is she really flirting with Shiratori-kun and Haibara-kun?"

"Apparently someone saw it all. She was hugging Haibara-kun in the park."

"Ew, that's seriously low! She acts like she's all that just because she's a little cute."

“Remember how she always insisted Haibara-kun was just a childhood friend? It felt like she was bragging. She’s such a bitch. I feel bad for Shiratori-kun and Hoshimiya-san!”

I’d accidentally overheard a group of girls from class one gossiping.

Afterword

If *Haibara* were a dating sim game, the first release would have Hikari, Miori, and Uta routes. The complete edition would add a Nanase route and a Serika route. (What am I talking about?)

Anyway, long time no see. I'm Amamiya Kazuki. The manga adaptation of *Haibara* has begun! Well, it hasn't launched yet at the time of writing this afterword (LOL). It's a fun read even in manga form. Please give it a try! It's formatted as a vertical strip, which has been popular. I guess that's easier to read on mobile.

Now then, this volume featured basketball. The previous volume ended with romance, so since the main subject of this series is youth, I thought a plot like the one in this volume was important to include. At the same time, I also depicted the effects of Natsuki's decisions from the previous volume. Even if you wish for things to remain as they are, nothing can stay the same forever.

As time passes, anything and everything will change. Recently, that fact has really been sinking in for me. Though I spend my days in a similar fashion, working and writing novels, in the process I come in contact with all sorts of perspectives, and little by little, my personal values change. I believe that's what growing up is.

When I was in high school, I never seriously thought about my future. I had no idea what I would do going forward. Now, I can see a future that's contiguous to my present. I think the more vividly you can visualize your future, the more mature you've become. And at the same time, you also become just a tiny bit lonelier.

Even so, no matter what future lies in wait, I hope I'll continue creating stories. If I can keep doing at least that, I'm sure I can be happy. Several of my novels have been published now, but I never imagined I'd have a series longer than five volumes. I owe this to all of the readers who have supported me.

I'd be thrilled if you stuck with me until the end. Even better, I'd be a very

happy author if you'd post your thoughts and impressions on social media sites like Twitter. In addition, please recommend this novel to your friends. I'd *also* be a very happy author if more and more people read this story. Thank you; I'm counting on all your help.

I wrapped things up on a good note (I think?), so it's time for acknowledgments. To my manager, N-san, I kept saying things like, "Deadlines? What do you mean?" as I chugged away, and I'm very, very sorry about that... I will make the first draft deadline for volume six. I mean it.

To my illustrator, Gin-san, thank you for the superb illustrations as always. The boys had some great scenes this time... They're so energetic... Miori in distress was also great... I'd like to give an enormous thank-you to everyone involved in this novel's publication as well.

If this story touched your heart even a little bit, then I'm fortunate to be an author. Well then, that's all for now. Let's meet in the next volume.

Oh yeah, I moved recently. I want to get fiber-optic internet installed soon and play games...



"I figured you wouldn't hug me if I didn't do this."

She pressed her body into me even more. Her cuteness was boundless, there were all sorts of soft sensations on me, and she smelled kinda nice—if we stayed like this, I didn't know what I would do next.

Haibara's Teenage

NEW GAME+

Stuck on the ball game committee—
but why do I sense **love in the air**?!

An introverted boy
who is Natsuki's
coworker and
bandmate.
Mei
SHINOHARA MEI

A quiet, studious
girl who seems
to be interested
in Mei.
Shizuka
FUNAYAMA SHIZUKI

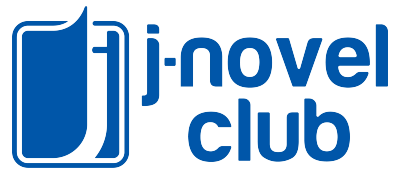
Natsuki's
childhood friend
who supports him
through his high
school debut.
Miori
MOTOMIYA MIORI

Our protagonist
who is on his
second round of life.
He's unaware of his
high specs.
Natsuki
HAIBARA NATSUKI





"I want to return to those days."



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by Kazuki Amamiya

Translated by Esther Sun Edited by Casey Pritt

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